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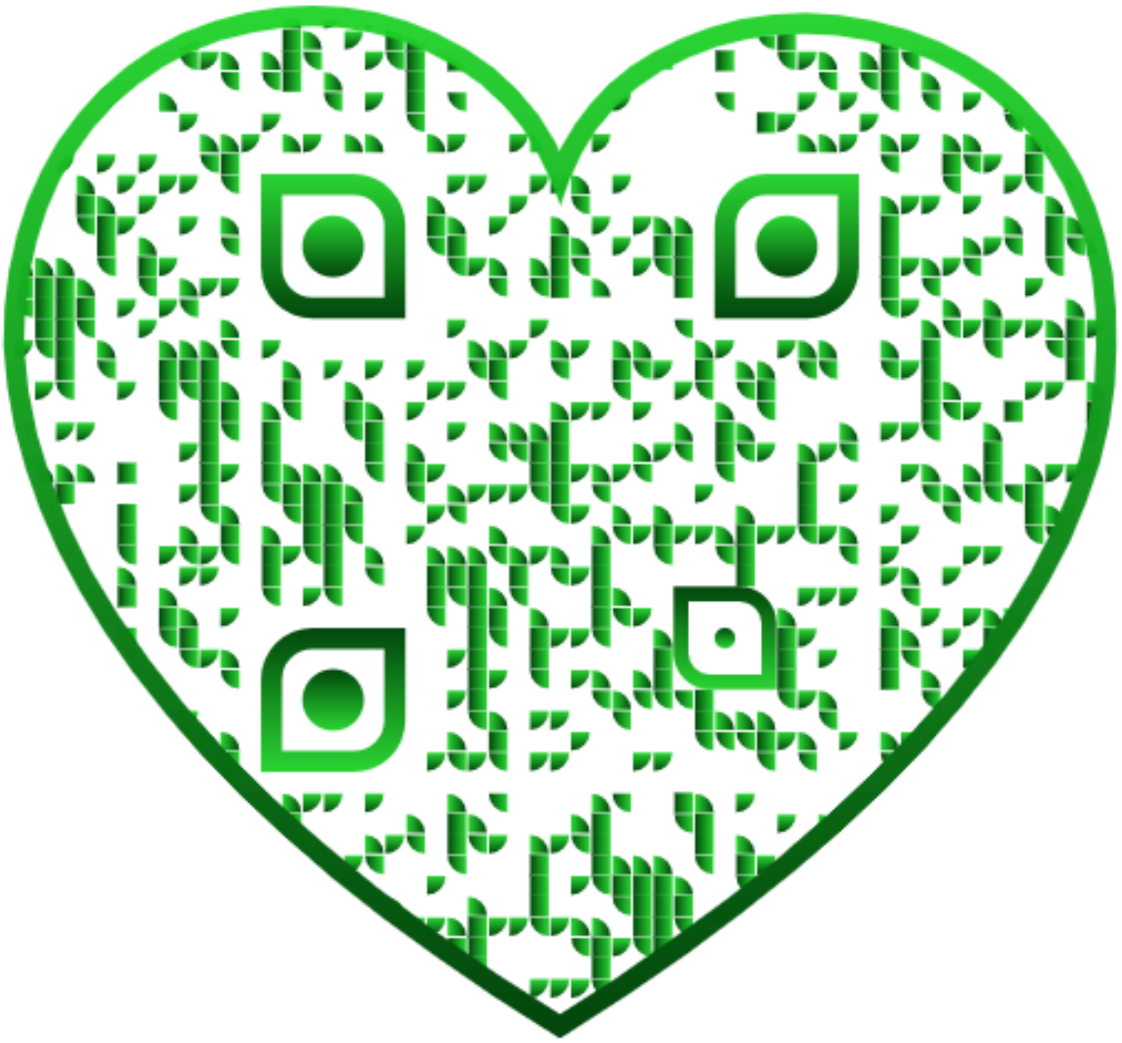

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EDITORIAL

How many of you out there are insane collectors like I am? I was wondering this as I took delivery of my extremely limited edition double LP version of Night Ranger's new album 'High Road'. I slid the album next to my Magnum double album coloured vinyls thinking, 'Only 500 copies world-wide? This will be worth quite a bit in years to come!' But of course, I'll never sell it. And I'll never play it, along with the complete collection of KISS albums in picture disc … limited to 500 each world-wide about 30 years ago. Must be worth a fair penny these days, but never played and currently stacked in boxes up in the attic. So what's the point? Why do we pay out for these collector's items just to hide them away, happy in the knowledge we have something rare from our favourite bands? I guess that's what it means to be a fan, and I, for one, will keep on happily collecting; and I'm sure I'm not alone.

Speaking of collectors' editions, the upcoming Ten album will be released as a double gate-fold vinyl with amazing artwork and associated goodies, and might even be issued as a picture disc at a later date. A first for Ten, but one I will happily be displaying on my wall! The new Ten album is just finishing up as I type and will be getting mixed by Dennis Ward early September. Having heard all the songs now, I'm really excited to hear the reaction from the fans; this really has the potential to be the best Ten album ever!

And on the subject of great albums, our good colleague and scourge of the notice boards, Tony Marshall, has a new band project releasing their debut album in the coming months. In Faith is going to surprise many people, as it did me. Imagine a mix of Danger Danger and H.e.a.t and you will get a small flavour of what the guys have to offer, with an amazing find on lead vocals. For me, the best British melodic hard rock debut in almost 20 years!

Ten and Tony will both be in attendance at this year's Firefest, the Saturday having just been announced as Sold Out as I type, with Sunday and Friday not far behind. For the biggest melodic rock party this year, you know where you should be on the weekend of October 24th-26th. Hope to see many of you there.

Bruce

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MARILLION

Live albums are ten-a-penny now, long gone the days when a band could suddenly go stratospheric on the back of a double slab of vinyl capturing the energy and vibrancy of a live show. However in the age of DVD and Blu-ray there are still stunning, and now visual, gems to be discovered. 'A Sunday Night Above The Rain' from UK Progressive evergreens Marillion is undoubtedly one such release, documenting a captivating, emotional display from a band at the peak of their powers and in front of a rabid audience at the final day of their Dutch (there's also a UK and Canadian) three day "weekend". Steven Reid gets his brolly out as he speaks to all five members of the band. Photo by Jill Furmanovsky.

"We take a lot of care when deciding set-lists and this one seemed to work very well." Marillion's ever relaxed drummer Ian Mosley begins, when asked why 'A Sunday Night Above The Rain' was chosen for a wider release from a band known for making live recordings available exclusively from their website. "With Regards to production, sound and visuals, we have a fantastic team of very talented people; their efforts are often a labour of love." Something guitarist Steve Rothery is keen to confirm.

"Ian's right, we have a great team of people involved in both the live show design and the filming and editing of the video and audio." Although the pair's enthusiasm does make Mosley a little uncomfortable. "If any of them read this I'm probably going to have to buy them a drink!"

"The way these weekends are structured", bass-master Pete Trewavas continues. "Allows us to spend more money than usual on production, lights and sound and spend more time on the intricacies of the music and performance. Add to that the fact that it's the Sunday night show from our latest convention, featuring the latest album. So it is current material we are very proud of and we would like a wider audience to be given the opportunity to see what we are about these days." Again it's Mosley who sums things up nicely.

"Put simply, it's a very good way of capturing the essence of what we, our fans and our music are all about."

One of the many highlights of 'A Sunday Night…' is watching a packed hall sing the 'Holidays In Eden' favourite 'Waiting To Happen' so loudly that the man known simply as 'h' allows them to take over…

"Well, I don't think I'll ever get used to it," the clearly touched frontman states as he tries to explain the emotions that moment creates. "And I would fight that possibility on principle. Over the years, Marillion have arrived at a place where we don't really have fans, we have a family. It's a big family obviously, but there is a one-to-one feeling between band and crowd. Many of these songs, although never having been chart-hits and therefore obscure to the man in the street, are known by heart to all our people, almost to the point of being soundtracks to a great many people's lives. I know this because I'm repeatedly told it. What you're seeing when you watch 'Waiting To Happen' is a reflection of that. One of the best things, in fact *the* best thing about being a lyricist, is the mind-blowing joy of watching a thousand people sing words to you, which were once just private thoughts in your head. It's a feeling of privilege and of receiving love on a wonderfully unnatural scale."

Rothery adds, "The passion and energy that you get from that kind of crowd makes you give everything in your performance, it is amazing and like nothing else on earth."

The commercially available version of 'A Sunday Night Above The Rain' contains only the Dutch, Port Zealande, "weekend" performance, however visit the legendary Marillion.com and a four disc version is also available featuring an almost identical set from the Canadian convention.

"Montreal is a very different experience for the band and the fans," Rothery reflects. "The Dutch convention has more production and a larger audience which creates a bigger spectacle but the venue in Montreal is more intimate." Quiet up until now, keyboard player Mark Kelly admits however that he hasn't taken up the opportunity to compare and contrast sets.

"Honestly, I try not watch our DVDs if I can possibly help it and I can't actually remember them well enough now to comment! We did feel at the time though, that because the Montreal show had a different vibe about it that it was worth putting it out despite the similar set-list." Rothery's memory, however, would appear to be stronger.

"They are both fantastic in their own ways, so we decided that it would be interesting to see the same set from both conventions."

Vintage Marillion classic 'Garden Party' closes out the set on disc two and after years of shying away from the pre h material, recent times have seen a mellowing in that direction. It's Kelly who takes up the theme.

"For a number of years after Steve H joined the band we had no choice but to play a lot of the Fish era stuff. Once we had enough songs with Steve it was no longer necessary and in fact we made a conscious effort to leave the past behind. Now h has been our singer for 25 years, we no longer think we have to worry about shedding the past and are all happy to bring back some old favourites as and when we feel like it."

Rothery is keen to add his thoughts on the subject.

"I'm personally very proud of all the different eras of the band and it's good to vary the set as much as possible at the conventions." However it is one of the band's newest, 'Sounds That Can't Be Made', tracks which introduces the show in magnificent fashion.

"We're all very proud of 'Gaza'," h says about the song which has courted controversy. "I'm particularly proud of the boys in the band for deciding we should put that message out there. That took courage all round. But we feel it's something that needs to be heard if those people are not to be bullied across the decades to come as well as decades past. It's a song which was

always going to upset some people, and I had to be very thorough in my research before I finished the lyric. I spoke to ordinary people living there from both faiths before opening my big mouth. It's not anti Semitic. It's a plea on behalf of a child. It works well as a piece of music too. It's a heavy piece of work in every sense."

Trewavas is keen to expand further.

"'Gaza' is 'one of those songs'. We knew it was special when we were working on it and it has many facets and strength to make the whole bigger than the sum of the parts. The subject matter alone gave us and particularly h many sleepless nights and consumed all our time and effort. We wanted the music to add weight and clarity to the lyrics particularly and get people thinking about the situation. It is a powerful piece of work."

What though of the rumour of Marillion following the likes of Journey and Kiss down the road of rerecording some of the favourite tracks from their past?

"I can confirm the rumour is not only true," Trewavas reveals, "but the album 'Best Sounds' is out and available through a handful of South American record labels and also on iTunes and the like."

Which explains the lack of a UK release for 'Best Sounds'.

"It was our South American promoters' idea," Mosley expands. "He wanted to have something new-ish that he could give to the media to help promote the tour. It seems to have done the job - who really knows? - as we had a lot of press and TV exposure and the ticket numbers were up compared to the last tour."

Kelly too chips in.

"Also the re-recordings were mainly to get around some of the contractual limitations of the older material. Having said that it was fun to revisit them in the studio environment and attempt to recreate the often somewhat dated sound of the 1980s and 90s!"

And h completes the tale.

"Fortunately, we have a resident genius-who-is-not-afraid-of-hard-work in Michael Hunter and he made the process quick and easy for us. The idea of revisiting those songs and updating the vocal delivery here and there, was if anything, a relief. It's hard to hear yourself singing from 20 years back, there's so much you'd not do now!"

So if the opportunity to iron out those vocal moments is a welcome one, is it strange for the singer to hear himself singing the Fish era classic 'Kayleigh' on CD?

"Not for me because I have often sung it live. I daresay it might be strange for someone who has only ever heard the original. These things tend to feel sacrosanct. I'm sure a lot of people will think "Oh no! Why have they let him record that?!" But I guess if anyone has earned the right... and as long as the band are happy about it, then the purists will just have suffer!"

A point Trewavas is happy to confirm.

"People who have been following us even with mild curiosity since Steve joined the band, will have heard a number of the older songs with him singing the lyrics and of course it has been a long time since he joined, his voice is the voice of Marillion for all of our fans these days."

So, with an excellent DVD/Blu-ray/CD in the bag and a South American "Best Of" summing up their past neatly, is it time for a new Marillion album?

"Pete was touring with Transatlantic for the first few months of this year," Rothery explains, "and I've been recording my solo album, 'The Ghosts of Pripyat' which I'll be touring with in October and November *[tour dates and album info at www.steverothery.com and a review of Steve's new live CD can be found elsewhere this issue]*. So I would think that it's going to be sometime in 2016 before the next album is released!"

Mosley adds some words of caution.

"This is Marillion. At the best of times getting us all in the studio at one time is like trying to get Pandas to mate. We have started the writing process, which involves jamming for months. Sometimes nothing of any worth occurs but occasionally a hidden gem will be found. Luckily we record every note so when this does happen we have it. It's a very slow and sometimes frustrating process but it is the way we have been doing it for 30 years. So to answer the question: I have no idea...sorry!"

AN UNCONVENTIONAL WEEKEND!

Starting life in 2002 as a four day, one-off event at Butlins in Minehead, the initially annual, but now biannual, Marillion Weekends have reached legendary status amongst the band's diehard fans. Five years later the event was staged outside of The UK for the first time, Port Zealande in The Netherlands proving a hugely popular venue, before 2009 saw the event reduced to three sets in three days. However to compensate, it was also the first year two "weekends" were staged, Montreal added to the Dutch dates. And yet that still wasn't enough, UK Marillo-fans demanding their heroes bring the party back home, so as of 2011, you could spend a quality long-weekend with h, Steve, Mark, Pete and Ian in either Canada, The Netherlands, or the good old UK, Leamington Spa and then Wolverhampton both "occupied" in recent times.

Mark Kelly takes up the story…

"We actually got the idea from The Stranglers. Their manager helped us set up our first one back in 2002 at Pontins but we had no idea that it would grow into such a wonderful event on the Marillion calendar."

"I think we get as excited as the fans leading up to the whole event," Trewavas adds. "We spoil ourselves with production, lights and sound so we can put on a surprise every night and really try to give as much as we get back. It is a fantastic thing to have so many devoted fans giving so much and showing their appreciation at the end of these shows."

"We're always amazed by the amount of effort people put in to see us and each other actually, because they have become a big social event for many people too," Kelly continues. "With some travelling thousands of miles".

Surely staging three, three day events isn't all plain sailing?

"It's all a doddle!!" Mosley blurts out, tongue absolutely rooted in cheek. "I am always amazed that we as a band still have the capability at our age to retain so much information. There isn't much left in the tank by the end of any convention, even less for Steve H who is usually just running on vapour by the time the last encore is played, but it's so worth it."

Something the singer is all too keen to confirm.

"We need seven hours of music rehearsed and ready to play for each weekend. This is a considerable technical feat of sound-programming for Mark and Steve and, of course, a feat of memory for all concerned. After performing the 'Brave' album at the last convention I was indeed emotionally and physically wrung-out, but I still had to find the brain and heart-space for another five hours of original compositions. Fortunately I'm naturally blessed with the ability to remember song-words; otherwise I'd need an autocue. I could still occasionally use a nurse and some counselling!"

So, if you're at a loose end in Montreal, Port Zealande, or Wolverhampton during the spring of 2015, Marillion, no doubt, will have a few suggestions as to what you could get up to!

BERNIE MARSDEN

Bernie Marsden will forever be immortalised as one of the original members of Whitesnake and the co-writer of the huge hit 'Here I Go Again', which somewhat glosses over the fact he also worked with Paice, Ashton and Lord, UFO, Cozy Powell and many more. He also has a string of solo albums to his name, with his latest effort 'Shine' set to impress. The album is a collection of great songs with some high profile guests, so James Gaden spoke to Bernie to hear all about it…

'Shine' has taken me by surprise – with it being on Provogue I was expecting a Blues album – and it's not! There is certainly some Blues on there, but there's a lot of Rock, some more mellow stuff… it's a bit of all sorts.

I think it will surprise a few people. I took a long time over this one, I worked on it for most of last year – not every day, but once I had the deal, the boss of Provogue did a nice thing. When they said they wanted me to make an album, I said 'Great!' and asked what kind of album they wanted. He said 'I want a Bernie Marsden album.' None of that 'I want this sort of song' or 'I want this kind of sound', he just told me to do what I do. I thought that was like the old days with Whitesnake, we made the records and the record company sold them. In the 1990s, they tried to control the artist too much, saying that they couldn't hear a single in there or whatever. I didn't get disillusioned by that change, I just decided to avoid that. I would produce my own records and sell them at my gigs. I did that for a long time.

There are so many standout moments on there, but I can't avoid mentioning the cover of Whitesnake's 'Trouble' with David Coverdale guesting on vocals.

It's a bit good isn't it? The boy didn't let me down! (laughs) That was a combination of two very positive years of reconnecting. We're very close again now. We looked at each other and wondered… were we ever *not* close? You can't go through all we went through together in Whitesnake and not have some bond there, it's like a family really. We are always connected because of 'Here I Go Again', and an interesting thing, the first time I played with Whitesnake again was at Sweden Rock Festival, where I joined them onstage. I pointed out to David that we had never actually played 'Here I Go Again' together before! He was freaked out, he never realised, so it was this big thing – for the first time ever, the writers of 'Here I Go Again' are going to play it together! And it was magical, really good.

What made you decide to re-make 'Trouble'?

I'd thought of recording it in a laid back, acoustic, almost Folk-Blues style. I did it, and I called David and told him I'd done it again. I asked him if he fancied singing it and he said 'Yeah!' and asked me to send it over. I did, and he replied 'It's a bit tame, old son!' So I told him that I didn't want to be presumptuous about how he should deliver it, having him screaming or anything, and he said 'Well, I'd like to do what I can for you.' We talked about it and we ended up with this version, with all that power he has. I think people will be surprised. It's in the same key as when we recorded it the first time and he's singing great. People have these opinions of him, but I'll tell you this – I asked him on a Monday, by the end of the week the track was done and dusted. None of that 'Speak to my manager' kind of thing, he simply said 'Of course I will!' and that was nice, because 'Trouble' was one of the first songs we ever wrote together. We used to say we should have done it a bit tougher, which I think we have now.

And he's not the only high profile guest, as you have Joe Bonamassa on the title track…

Yeah, Joe plays my old Les Paul more than I do! (laughs) People can't believe I'd loan it out as it's worth quite a lot of money, but between Joe and the guys he has looking after his equipment, it's probably safer with him than it is with me! Joe and I bonded – he played the Albert Hall and had Eric Clapton guesting with him, and I was at the after show party. It wasn't a big affair, I was lucky enough to be invited, and he came over and introduced himself. I said 'I know who you are, I've been watching you for the last two hours!' (laughs) He told me he was a big fan and we became good friends. He recorded one of my songs on 'Driving Through The Daylight' so it's all been very positive.

Is there anybody left on your bucket list that you want to play with?

Oh yeah, I'll never tick them all off. I recently played with the Allman Brothers, a year ago – I'd never have thought that! And I've just done Jack Bruce's solo album – these things come up, Elkie Brooks called me up the other day. She'd been playing Joe Bonamassa's 'Place In My Heart' and she said 'I loved that song, I'd been playing it for about a week, looked in the credits and found out

you wrote it, you bugger!' (laughs) I've been fortunate in my time to have played with Jon Lord, Ian Paice, Cozy Powell… some really top people, which is why I like to move on and be positive. I played with Jon Lord for eight years, he was a giant and I got to play his tribute concert at The Royal Albert Hall.

On the album there's Fleetwood Mac's 'Dragonfly'. I went to see Peter Green before I started recording. I told him I was making an album, I told him he was an influence and asked him if I was to record a Fleetwood Mac song, and have him play on it, which song would he choose? I know what he's like, I thought he'd take a few minutes but after about five seconds he said 'Dragonfly'. That was written by Danny Kirwan, and that is so Peter – out of all his back catalogue of great songs, he picks one by Danny Kirwan! There's a lot of people you have to go through to get to Peter. I kept trying to get hold of him while I was in the studio to get him to come down, and to cut a long story short, it never happened, I finished it. I tried to play like Peter would have and channel Gary Moore, thinking what he would have done with it. It's all finished, then I get an email from his people saying 'We've given it consideration, and we're happy for Peter to come and play on your recording.' I asked them in April, it was now October! So I love the atmosphere of it, even though Peter wasn't on there.

You've got a couple of Purple people too, Don Airey and Ian Paice are on the record.

They are – Don plays organ on 'Shine' and Ian is on 'Trouble'. He didn't get to play on the studio version because he wasn't with Whitesnake then, although he did play it live sometimes. It helps complete the circle. Don and I have known each other for about forty years, I played on his last album, he's played on mine. It's nice. I also re-recorded 'Here I Go Again' which I haven't put on the record, Don played on that too. It was a run though with the guys in the studio, everyone knew it, so we played it. As we were in Abbey Road, I thought we might as well record it properly!

Yeah – Abbey Road is a pretty legendary place, and you even dedicated the last track 'NW8' to it.

I did, because it's magical. It has a charisma about it, but first and foremost, it's a *great* studio. People forget that, it was the first custom built studio in the world. They look at its history, which is easy to do, I did most of my stuff in Studio 3, where the Beatles made 'Revolver' and Pink Floyd did 'Dark Side Of The Moon'! There was a 40 year playback of that with Nick Mason while I was there, and one week while I was in Studio 3, Paul McCartney was in 2, so I was back with the big boys! (laughs) It was inspiring, so 'NW8' came from that. Everyone is so helpful. The people there know what they're doing, they've been there that long. We worked in the modern idiom using Pro-Tools, but it was done with an analogue attitude. We used the modern techniques for the editing but we've still got a warm sound. It sounds great on vinyl. There's going to be a limited edition double album on vinyl, so if you're into vinyl, get one of them before they're all gone!

It does sound great and it was produced by one of your old band mates, Rob Cass.

Yes, that's how it all began! Two years ago he got in touch, asked how I was doing, and then he said he worked at Abbey Road. I hadn't been there for years, so he invited me to lunch. We had this catch up and I mentioned I was planning a new record. I said 'Wouldn't it be great to do it here!' and he said 'Why not?' That's how it developed, much to the horror of the record company. (laughs) It's nice to have an album out with radio plugs and interviews with people like yourself. I've done bit and pieces via my website, a covers album and some Rory Gallagher stuff. I'd like to get some of that stuff out to more people, a lot of my stuff has never even been available for download so I'd like to make some of that stuff available to people when I've had it for years.

"I had been doing everything on my records, recording, writing, performing, producing. It was nice to have a producer so I could go back to being the artist."

BERNIE MARSDEN

My favourite on the album is 'Kinda Wish She Would' – wasn't that a song from the Company Of Snakes album 'Burst The Bubble'?

Yes, it was called 'Kinda Wish You Would' on there. I changed the lyrics a bit and Rob had heard it. He suggested redoing it like ZZ Top. It turned out really well, there's some good tones in there and I think it's a catchy tune. I was thinking of an Allman Brothers vibe initially. It was nice, I had been doing everything on my records, recording, writing, performing, producing. It was nice to have a producer so I could go back to being the artist.

Prior to 'Burst The Bubble' one of my favourite things you ever did, was the 'Once Bitten' album with The Snakes, with Jorn Lande on vocals. I thought that was the best album Whitesnake never made!

Yeah! (laughs) That was a strange period, I have to tell you. I could do a whole interview with you just on that one year, which was Micky Moody and I basically working with a foreign band. I've got all kinds of outtakes and stuff we never used, which I titled 'Britains And Vikings'. (laughs) 'Once Bitten' is a good record, it still stands up. Hard to get hold of now, isn't it? I should maybe look into that.

I was introduced to Jorn Lande by Willy Bendiksen, who became the drummer in The Snakes. He played me this recording, and I thought it was a Whitesnake bootleg! He was singing 'Mistreated' and I thought 'Where was this? That's not me on guitar!' Willie said 'That's not you because that isn't Whitesnake!' I was amazed, and I said 'Well who is this guy singing?' It turned out to be a guy who worked in the tax office in Oslo! I couldn't believe it! So I met Jorn a couple of days later, we had a run through and he didn't speak much English, he was very quiet. I called Micky up and sent him some demos and Micky had the same reaction, he thought it was David. Without going into too much gossip, it didn't work out. I do remember saying to him once 'Look, you might be able to sing like David, but don't start acting like him.' (laughs) We're okay now, I don't like falling out with people and Jorn is a really talented boy. He can also sing like Ronnie Dio as well, he can sing just about anything.

Do you have a particular favourite on the record?

I have a connection to 'Ladyfriend' because it's semi-autobiographical, and that's Mark Felton from Nine Below Zero playing harmonica on it. It wasn't meant to be that long, it wasn't meant to have that intro, but it just all worked. I'm also very happy with 'Who Do We Think We Are'. A few people are surprised I wrote it, but I'm really happy with it, I was inspired by the John Lennon vibe and radio are picking up on that one.

Has all this reinvigorated you into being a solo artist?

I never really saw myself *not* being a solo artist. Ever since M3 finished, I've always seen myself as a solo guy. Even my Rory Gallagher thing, that's not really a tribute, just like M3 wasn't a tribute – it can't be, because we had three of the guys from the original band! Rory's thing was reinforced by his brother Donal, because Donal got very emotional at a show and he gave me a hug and said it wasn't so much how I played the guitar or did the songs, it was the atmosphere I created that reminded him a lot of a Rory show. People can call it a tribute if they want, Donal Gallagher told me it was 'magical' so that'll do me!

And you're playing some dates in November?

I am, a small tour, I'm going out with Joanne Shaw Taylor. I'm opening, then I'll join her and her band for the last twenty minutes of the show. I think it will work well, it's a good pairing, despite Joanne being a lot younger and better looking than me!

'Shine' is out now via Mascot Records. See Bernie live with Joanne Shaw Taylor in November - for full details of 'Shine' and tour dates, visit www.berniemarsden.com

Interview with Dave 'Snake' Sabo by Mónica Castedo-López

The charismatic trio of guitarists Scotti Hill and Dave 'Snake' Sabo, and bassist Rachel Bolan have 28 years behind them as original members of the multiplatinum selling band Skid Row. With singer Johnny Solinger replacing Sebastian Bach for the last 14 years and drummer Rob Hammersmith joining in 2010, August 2014 is the time for part two of a series of EPs they started last year. From the road in the US in July, a talkative Sabo answered questions from yours truly about this release on UDR/Warner, 'Rise of the Damnation Army: United World Rebellion: Chapter 2'. With five brand new tracks plus two covers, what's not to like?

At the time of our last interview, before your London show in April last year, you were planning on releasing '…Chapter 2' in October, but it is only coming out now. Why did it take longer than originally foreseen?

Basically we toured longer than we anticipated. This EP has been done for a while and we wanted to have it out about three months ago but we had to coordinate with both our record labels (the one for North America and the other for the rest of the world), so the only time where they could release at the same time was the first week of August.

You're excused then! I can see the musical direction is getting heavier and heavier and also with a touch of punk. How do you describe 'Rise of the Damnation Army'?

For us it's just a natural progression from the first one. We purposely didn't write all the songs for all three EPs at once. We wanted to remain as much in the moment as we could and also this way we didn't have much time to overthink it, which is good. Because it's not as many songs as on a full length CD you tend to focus on the final place of each song and really work everything out to the point where you know it's the best possible song that you could write at that particular time in the band's life. With these five songs we just seemed to be very much on the same page the whole process of writing, recording, mixing and mastering. There weren't many disagreements at all, nothing that was detrimental to the whole process. Making this record was the most fun I've ever had making a Skid Row record. It was a great experience from the beginning to the end of it and I'm pretty sure we are going to be able to keep that vibe happening for the next EP as well.

When is the next EP scheduled to come out?

Good question. Because this record was delayed for a few months and we're starting touring for the new EP in August, it's kind of strange. Not that the EP feels old, but it doesn't feel brand new. So right now it's in limbo. We're really excited to have the public finally get a chance to hear it and hopefully connect with it, and then play new songs off it as well. So, I would think we would tour on it for at least six months, so the release day for part 3 will really depend on what is put in front of us and where our heads are at.

Are there any live dates confirmed for the UK?

There will be sometime between October and December.

Do you think you will be playing 'We Are the Dammed'?

Absolutely! We are already playing it! We started a couple of shows ago and it feels really good to play. It's a lot of fun and that's always important. It's a drag if you sit there, you play something new and you find out it's boring.

Four of the songs on the EP are really heavy/hardcore and then you have the beautiful ballad 'Catch Your Fall'. What can you tell us about this song?

It seems like every record, it's part of Skid Row. At least one ballad on every record, it's just part of how we write and who we are. It just makes sense to include one on each EP. More than one would be overkill and it's not like we're sitting there saying we need to write a ballad, it just seems to happen and that is the way it has been since the very beginning when we started writing together.

As on the previous EP, you also have two covers, about which I am really surprised and pleased: Queen's 'Sheer Heart Attack' and Aerosmith's 'Rats In The Cellar'. On the press release you mentioned that, at least as far as you know, nobody has covered these before. Why did you pick these two specific songs?

It's funny that the biggest disagreements we had when we were making this EP were about what cover songs to do because everybody has their wish list. Some people wanted to do obscure stuff, some people wanted to do very recognisable stuff, so getting on the same page with it is quite difficult. I'm not quite sure who suggested 'Sheer Heart Attack' but we have gone through a bunch of different songs and went back and forth, and for one reason or another it didn't click until 'Sheer Heart Attack' was brought up. Then I came up with 'Rats In The Cellar'. A lot of us discovered Aerosmith on the 'Rocks' album and that's why we chose

that song. Aerosmith has always been a huge influence on us and one of our favourite bands. So, luckily we were all in agreement on both of those songs and it was so much fun to do them.

Are you curious to know what Aerosmith think about it?

I haven't had the opportunity to play them it but I'm definitely going to, for sure. Hopefully they'll like it.

About the title of the series of EPs, what is the rebellion against?

First of all, we are not a political band by any stretch of the imagination; we just believe in individuality and community, and just doing the right thing. I feel like we've become such an apologetic society. We're sorry about everything, but if you just do the right thing, you don't have to be apologetic. You basically have to stand up for yourself. If you believe what is right in your heart, you need to stand up and let your voice be heard. There's a lot of people out there with a voice and they should have it be known.

You've been in the band for over 25 years. When you started, did you ever think you would get this far?

God no! We started the band in '86 when Rachel and I were 20 years old and at that point the idea of even living to the age of 40 seemed such a hard notion! And to think that the band would be in existence well beyond that is just mind-boggling. I think part of the reason is that we believe in what we do. We play music for a living and believe in the spirit of this band. We started the band with very similar visions and goals and it's the highest form of expression that we know, writing songs and being able to perform them live. It's such an amazing privilege to be able to do this and that the audiences out there still allow us to do this. This is not a birth right, it's an actual privilege. Thank you everybody for allowing us to do this. It is the greatest gift in the world and I mean that with all sincerity. Thank you for making a little boy's dream come true. I am very thankful and humbled.

Their new release 'Bastard Of The Blues' being equal to the excellence of classics 'Walkin' The Razor's Edge' or 'Wild In The Streets', the Canadian rock legend Helix returns in style! Still, it wasn't only this album Alexandra Mrozowska chatted to singer Brian Vollmer about, as they also talked about what the future holds in store for the band… "Tour, tour, tour..."

How different is 'Bastard Of The Blues' from the previous Helix album, 'Vagabond Bones', which was released five years ago?

On 'Vagabond Bones', Sean and I were just starting to develop a writing relationship. I hate to say that CD was less focused, because from a song-related perspective it was very focused but perhaps from an overall feel for the CD, less so... 'Bastard Of The Blues' has a continuity in sound from beginning to end that perhaps wasn't on 'Vagabond Bones'. From a production perspective, Aaron Murray progressed phenomenally as a producer from the first CD.I think he played a huge part in the overall sound of the record. The process we went through to record also differed considerably from the 'Vagabond…' era. The band was just re-grouping when that CD was coming together and quite a few of the songs were already recorded. When we went to record 'Bastard Of The Blues', Sean and myself worked on the tunes at his place in Toronto until we felt we had taken them as far as we could go. We then sent the rough demos, which we had recorded on my iPhone, to Daryl and Fritz and had them live with the tracks for a couple of weeks. After that, we went into a rehearsal hall with both those guys and Sean and Aaron. Then we knocked out the arrangements and drum and bass parts. Aaron recorded the songs on his laptop and then used Pro-Tools to make better demos. We lived with those demos for a couple of weeks and made notes of any adjustments we wanted to make. I went over to his apartment and re-sang my vocal parts there, fine tuning them for the final recording. Once we hit the studio, the songs grew a little bit more. The last step was to have Kaleb and Chris come in to do their guitar parts and we had Cheryl Lescom, Nick Walsh, and Jeff Fountain guest on a couple of tracks.

Why have you decided to include songs from the 2011 EP 'Skin In The Game' on the new album?

Initially I thought we might be a little short time-wise on the CD length. Both 'Skin In The Game' and 'Bitch Is A Bullet' were on the 'Skin In The Game' EP, which sold less than 500 units, so it made sense to

include them on the new album. We thought both songs were great tracks and hadn't really been exposed. As it turned out, the CD was plenty long enough with 'Bastard of the Blues' and 'When All The Love Is Gone', both clocking in at over four minutes.

What are your personal highlights of 'Bastard Of The Blues'? Any favourites in particular?

My favourite track is the title cut. It's a Helix classic and goes over dynamite when we play it live. Cheryl Lescom, who sings the Blues skats in the lead section, has been a close friend of mine for nearly thirty years. I consider her to be one of the best female blues voices ever produced by Canada – she's Canada's answer to Janis Joplin. Lyrically the song is a step above and Sean's guitar solo is over the top. Probably one of the best songs I've ever had the honour of being a part of writing. When Ron Keel heard it, the song blew him away. He couldn't stop talking about it on his radio show out of Reno: 'The Streets of Rock and Roll'.

Music-wise, the final track 'Sticks And Stones' has some distinctive Blues/Country/Americana flavours. What was it inspired by?

This was a last-minute addition to the CD. Sean kept pushing to record the song. I wasn't quite sold on it in its demo state, but I trust Sean's judgement, so we took it into the practice hall and then finally into the studio. Initially it was going to be a full out Rock song, but after hearing the song played with acoustic guitar, we opted for a more Bluesy, earthier sound reminiscent of Aerosmith. The count you hear on guitar at the beginning of the song is actually Sean on his acoustic in his living room when we recorded the initial demo on my iPhone. The song turned out to be one of my favourites. A problem I had with the song at the beginning was the actual title. The full phrase we hear so often is "Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me." Lyrically I changed that around and wrote the song about people who do crazy things because they think they're invincible and end up killing themselves. Hence: "Sticks and stones never gonna break my bones/but he was so delusional/God bless his soul!"

Please tell us about the songwriting process while creating material for this album and your inspirations music and lyric wise.

The whole songwriting process today is quite different from when we started in 1977. When we recorded 'Breaking Loose' we had been playing all the songs from the album in our sets as we travelled through the bars across Canada. We would do pre-production with the producer and then go into the studio and record the whole band playing until we got a suitable "bed track". Once we had that we would start layering everything. Nowadays the songs are written at Sean's place in Toronto. Frequently we'll knock out three songs in four hours and then that's it for the day. By "three songs" what I'm talking about is usually a verse and chorus. Once I get home to London, Ontario I take the songs from my iPhone and put them on the hard drive of my computer. There might be months before I see Sean face to face again. In between we'll both work on lyrics and other ideas to go with what we have, trading those ideas back and forth by computer or over the phone. When we feel we have the song as far as we can take it, we then present it to Daryl, Fritz, and our producer Aaron Murray. All the songs go through a metamorphosis from beginning to end. Some, like 'Winning Is The Best Revenge', are hardly recognizable in their final state. The new effort of yours features guest vocals by Nick Walsh (Famous Underground/ex-Slik Toxik). Which track did he contribute to and what are the circumstances of this collaboration? Nick's a superb singer with a voice so high that only dogs can hear it at times!(laughs) While we were putting together this disc he and I were also working together on the 'Metal On Ice' CD and show at the Opera House in Toronto. Seeing as Nick can sing as high as anybody, I was intrigued to find out what he could contribute to 'Screaming at the Moon'. He surpassed all expectations. Nick Walsh is a fellow Canadian rocker. Coming from the country which the broad audience associates with Bryan Adams and Celine Dion, what do you think about the Canadian music scene, and the Rock and Metal scene in particular? The Canadian music scene is great if you're a Pop, Country, Jazz, or anything not Metal band. For Canadian Classic Rock artists, such as The Killer Dwarfs, Lee Aaron, The Headpins or Helix, it sucks. Canadian radio in general does not support new releases by Canadian Classic Rock acts. The exception is when you're playing in town and the promoter is advertising on the local station, but in general it's very difficult to get exposure in this country if you fall into this genre of music. When Helix had 'The Power of Rock And Roll' out in Canada a few years ago, 'Make 'Em Dance', our first single, was sitting at Number 31 on the Rock charts here. Our hometown radio station, FM 96: Corus Radio, wouldn't even give us a token spin. If they would have, it would have bumped the song to over 30 on the charts. At that point a lot of stations would have added the song just because of the numbers. Unfortunately, they wouldn't do it, so since then I've had a running battle with the station. My attitude is "fuck 'em"!

What are the next plans of Helix? Any tours in the pipeline?

Our plans for the future are to work the 'Bastard of the Blues' album for a couple of years. I feel there's more than a couple of singles we could release through Facebook with an accompanying video. Brent Doerner (ex-Helix guitarist) does our videos nowadays, so I'm going to go one song at a time. And tour, tour, tour...

The title, 'Framework' is another art related pun – do you have a list of future album titles? Is your Best of album going to be called 'Gallery'? If it is, I want a thank you!

Well yes, we used to have a list with names for the first three albums, so now we need to start thinking about new names. And yeah, 'Gallery', I like that! We certainly should consider something like 'Art Gallery' if we ever release a best of!

So it's album number three and another three year gap. Are you on a schedule?

Yes I guess we are more or less! We didn't plan for it but it just sort of happens that way. In between every WOA album I've done a W.E.T album, so I kept busy in those three years gaps. I want thank everyone for hanging in there and for patiently waiting for this new album. We know that we kept you waiting for a long time but I sure hope this new album was worth the wait!

To me, this album seems more upbeat overall, and I like that the only ballad is left until the very end. Where has all the energy come from?

When we started making this album, I already had a collection of songs that weren't necessarily meant for WOA. But once we decided we were gonna use these songs for the new album, we threw away the slower songs and replaced them with more up-tempo songs, as I was afraid there would be too many mid tempo songs on the album. Then when we started to mix, we realised that almost all songs were up-tempo, so it actually was a bit tricky to make the album sequence without having too many up-tempo songs in a row.

Do you feel that the band has progressed sufficiently from the first album to this one?

We always try to top ourselves in terms of writing and performing but to say that we progressed sufficiently would probably be an overstatement. We sure learned a lot from our previous albums, so this one was by far the easiest to record. We used to spend hours and hours making sure we got all the parts right but these days, the recordings run pretty smoothly.

What are the processes WOA go through to create a new album?

The routine is usually the same. I write the songs and record them in my studio. After that I start to send files to Herman and Lars who both have their own studios and they will replace the drum and vocals parts. Once all the recordings are finished, we send them to Lars who mixes them in his studio and that's more or less it.

It's sort of inevitable when you read anything about WOA that the Toto comparisons come up. Do you get a bit fed up of it?

WORK OF ART

Interview by Alan Holloway

Some may think it a bit pretentious to call your band Work of Art, like you're something special, but the Swedish trio going by that moniker have created a band that wears the name like a glove. To be fair, it's a velvet glove, smelling of roses and fine wine, but three works of art into their musical career it's now pretty hard to disagree that this band have made something worth framing, not just sticking on your fridge.

I caught up with guitarist and general mouthpiece Robert Sall (who also plays with W.E.T) after being very impressed with the new album 'Framework', certainly a step forward, in my opinion, from the previous two. A ballsy, upbeat record, 'Framework' should be at the top of any AOR fan's want list, so I guess the best place to start is with that album title…

Both yes and no. No because it's true and we never denied that. We don't mind being compared to one of the greatest bands in the world! And what would be the alternative, to that say we are not? C'mon, who are we trying to fool here… Of course we gotten a lot of crap for it as well but regardless of that, at this stage, after already having two very successful albums and with fans screaming for a third album, I think we proved that this band makes music people want to hear. Really, that's where our responsibility lies, to make the kind of records our fans wants to hear from us. Ultimately it's about showing respect for our fans because without them, we wouldn't have lasted more than one album. Of course some people will always repeat that old 'they're just a poor Toto copy band'. I think it is our best to date.

Speaking of Toto, I feel that 'Hold On to Love' is the most reminiscent of them on this album. Do you agree?

Oh absolutely. That song was originally meant for a Bobby Kimball fronted project so it was written with him in mind. Then we all liked it so much we decided to use it on this album. Having said that, we do have a lot of discussions within the band as to whether we can use tracks like 'Hold On To Love' or 'Camelia' on a WOA album or if they are too slick. But then again, if we like a song and it's our album, why not?! That smooth West Coast influence will always be a part of our sound.

I have a feeling that 'Framework' will be very well received – what are your plans for supporting it? Will we see you again in the UK?

Well, hopefully we get to play some UK dates but there haven't been any discussions about it so far. But we are discussing other dates in Europe with different promoters and we'll announce those dates as soon as they are 100% confirmed. Then of course we are playing Melodic RockFest in Chicago in October which is gonna be so much fun!

Personally, I thought your performance at Firefest last year was excellent, so lively! What can you tell me of your experiences that weekend?

Last year was my third year in a row playing Firefest and I've absolutely loved it every time. I love everything about it and especially that fans come together from all over the world to celebrate their love for Melodic Rock. The crowd is always fantastic and the event is world class. Big kudos to Kieran and his crew for creating such a lovely festival and I'm sad to see it end. Only drawback for us last year was that Lars had to perform with a throat infection which spread to one of his ears after the gig. It ended up with him almost going completely deaf on one side and it took about five months before it healed and that put the recording of the new album to a temporarily halt. But now he is well again. His ear will probably never recover 100 % but the human brain is amazing in the way it learns to compensate for those kind of things so he is not troubled by it anymore.

It would be rude not to ask about W.E.T – what's the current situation with them?

Right now everyone is pretty much doing their own thing like we usually do after coming off a W.E.T record. Eclipse is just months away from finishing their new album, Jeff's got a new album with his new project SOTO in the pipeline. Maybe after that, we'll get together again and make some new music but we haven't really discussed it yet.

Are you involved in any other projects?

Not really. I used to write a lot for different Frontiers projects and so on but I rarely do that anymore. I just find it so much more rewarding to work on my own projects. To work with guys in WOA & W.E.T is all I need really. Every once in a while, I still do some outside writing and playing, for instance I've recently worked with Tony Mills on his new solo album. Working with Tony has been an absolute joyride but really, I try to focus on my own stuff these days.

'Framework' is out now via Frontiers Records.

PAUL GILBERT

Paul Gilbert is a phenomenal guitar player with a string of solo releases to sit alongside his sterling work in Mr. Big. Initially starting off singing his own songs, Paul's most recent releases have focused more on instrumental tunes. With his new album 'Stone Pushing Uphill Man', Paul juxtaposes some new compositions with covers of songs by the likes of Aerosmith, James Brown, Elton John, Loverboy, The Police and The Beatles. The twist? He lets his guitar do the talking – or rather, the singing. An intrigued James Gaden asked Paul all about it.

The album surprised me - instead of you singing these songs, you've played the vocal parts on guitar, and made the guitar sound as close to the singer as possible! It's not what I expected at all, and it works much better than I thought it would.

Well I can't help what you expect, that's not my responsibility! (laughs) For me, it was just something I was really enjoying. I've been doing a lot of teaching and it's a great way to get right to the point with my students about the expressiveness of guitars. Vocal melodies are not usually super fast or really complicated, but they do require a lot of depth regarding musicianship. It makes you listen really closely to what I think are the most important parts, and they're great things to learn. I had such a good time doing it, I thought why not record some of them? It really helped my playing too. I could do another three albums like this and still have a great time.

I'm a frustrated singer - as a little kid, that's what I always wanted to be, but my voice was always a little disappointing. Finally, I figured I should put my love for vocal melodies together with my guitar playing and hopefully, the combination works!

It does! I always liked you as a singer, I prefer your vocal albums, with 'Burning Organ' being my favourite. However, the song that sold me on this record is Aerosmith's 'Back in The Saddle'. I found myself singing along to it, even though there isn't a voice there. The guitar work on that to replicate Steven Tyler's notes is amazing.

Thank you! Steven Tyler is an unbelievable singer and that's one of his most amazing moments. If I'd tried to cover that song as a vocalist, I'd fall short. With the guitar, all the notes are there for me. He hits some unbelievable high notes in that song and it's satisfying for me not to have to struggle to hit them, they're all there for me on the fret board. As a singer, the challenge so often is squeezing a certain note out of your voice. As a guitarist, it's different; you have to find expressive techniques like vibrato and dynamics. Singers phrase differently to guitar players. That was really beneficial to me as a guitar player, taking melodies I already knew - pretty much all these songs I grew up with. I could play them all on a kazoo in one take! The melodies are in my head, but the phrasing was often unfamiliar to what I'd do on a guitar. It was great to make my fingers work to match what was going on in my brain.

Did you play the songs from memory or did you sit and study the originals?

I listened really closely to the vocal lines on most of the tunes. I wanted to learn from them and get them right. There were varying degrees. On the James Brown one, it was so difficult to copy him, I gave up after the first verse and did my own thing! (laughs) The Aerosmith one, I really listened closely to. I did some promotional appearances in Japan and played some of this stuff live and I was really scared at first. I spent so much time and work in the studio, I wasn't sure if I could do it live. Fortunately, it came together and worked.

I was also intrigued with 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road', a song which is so closely associated with Elton John and the piano. Yet it works really well with the guitar.

I grew up in the 70s and there were so many cool Pop piano players, like Elton John, Burt Bacharach… if you listen to a 70s radio station there's so much Fender Rhodes, Wurlitzer, acoustic piano, Todd Rundgren did some great stuff like that. I had some piano envy, because you can play a chord with the right hand, change the bass note easily, that's much more inconvenient on a guitar. I didn't want to have songs taken away from me because of my chosen instrument, so I spent a lot of time learning 70s Pop tunes! I learned a lot of Elton John and that was one of my favourites. There's a huge vocal step where he jumps over an octave, and that's unusual in any kind of music, but it's great. I loved the melody and the only thing I changed was, as it is a guitar album, it needed a solo. So I inserted a crazy, almost Metal solo. Hopefully if Elton hears it he'll approve!

Was there a specific criteria for a song to make the record, or was it all on a whim?

It just had to be interesting to me and a lot of it was stuff I grew up with or that influenced me. Some of it was because it was a bit different. The James Brown song has less going on melodically, but way more going on rhythmically. He was a master of rhythm and grooves. That's something I wasn't too familiar with, I didn't listen to much James Brown as a kid, I was into more melodic acts like The Beatles and Elton John. That one was a challenge, and I had a good time doing it. I played the horn parts on guitar, I even played bongos! I loved the Funk groove it created and the solo, I had to play so tight to lock into that groove. It really demanded a lot from me as a player, that one is one of the most difficult to play live.

Were there any songs you tried that didn't work or you chose to leave out?

There were some I considered, but didn't do because they are downers. Elvis Costello and Burt Bacharach made a record called 'Painted From Memory' and it's such a great record, but it's all about divorce and lost love. If that's your mood, it's the greatest record in the world, but I wanted to keep the album upbeat! I almost did their song 'God Give Me Strength' because that has a great melody, but it was bringing me down too much. I'd have loved to do some others but I ran out of time. I'd like to do 'Fire And Ice' by Pat Benatar… 'Long Live Rock And Roll' by Rainbow was one I fooled around with. 'Magic' by Pilot would work great, imagine that 'Oh, oh oh, it's magic!' line, that would have worked great! I'm sure I'll do volume two someday.

The one song that does have an actual vocal performance is the title track, 'Stone Pushing Uphill Man'. What is the story behind that?

It was a title I'd had for a while. I've been listening to a lot of Blues and it's kind of a Blues song, the chords are maybe a little more Jazz than standard Blues, but it's Blues at its core. The lyrics themselves are about me. Last year, I was at the peak of my hearing loss, before I got my hearing aids. I was starting to retreat from everybody and was kinda down. With my music, I wasn't feeling like a fan of it anymore, I wasn't listening to much Rock, I was into more Jazz and Blues, and I didn't feel I was good at those styles. I just felt like this stone was the accomplishments of a Rock player and it was just falling downhill. It wasn't what I liked anymore and I felt like all of my efforts were that stone, just falling down hill. I started pushing the stone again, because on this record and on 'Vibrato' there are what some call 'adult' chords, things you get more in Jazz, because that's mostly what I listen to now, alongside 70s Pop nostalgia. As I was pushing the stone uphill, I was thinking 'God, this is so hard!' but I discovered I was really starting to enjoy doing it again. I was playing guitar, being challenged, doing the music exactly how I want to, and the effort resulted in something I loved doing.

Who did you use for the playing and production on the album?

I have an online guitar school which I work on everyday and I found an assistant to help me out with the video editing and stuff. He's a guitar player and he has a great ear and he ended up helping out in other stuff to the point where I quickly showed him how to use Pro-Tools. After a few recordings I realised hey, he's the co-producer! (laughs) He was great, he's much younger than me and he's a big fan of Metallica and Guns N' Roses, so he has that youthful energy.

I played all the guitars, most of the bass, and of course the bongos. (laughs) The drummers were Mike Portnoy who played on 'Working For The Weekend' and 'Why Don't We Do It In The Road'. Kenny Aronoff played on all the others. My co-producer is Swedish and he knows a bunch of Swedish musicians who lived nearby and they came in and played on k.d. lang's 'Wash Me Clean'. Don't ask me their names, I literally only met them that one day! The guitar is the main star, it's a very guitar heavy album. Even the vocal harmonies on the originals, I recreated with guitars.

Is this likely to be it for you singing on solo albums now, are you going to go this route instead?

I find it easier to play than to sing, at least in terms of enjoyment. When I did the song 'Shock Absorber', I wrote it as a vocal song, I had three verses, the whole thing written and I started to sing it in the studio. After one pass, I thought 'Wait a minute, let me try that on guitar'. So I listened to each one, as a listener I preferred hearing the guitar version so much, I decided not to sing it. I just put the lyrics on my lap and played over what I would sing - plus it allows me to throw in some extra licks too. It's funny, after the record was done, I went to Brazil to do a clinic tour. I did some singing there, doing Hendrix tunes and stuff. It was some of the best singing I've done in my life! I saw some Youtube footage and I thought 'Man, I'm singing great!' (laughs) I do enjoy singing, but sometimes I find I'm disappointed with my voice. Other times it really surprises me!

I think you are an underrated singer, because I remember seeing Mr. Big in Shepherds Bush and Eric left the stage while you, Billy and Pat sang 'It's For You' *a capella*. It sounded fantastic, the harmonies were superb.

Oh yeah! That was a Lennon/McCartney song, but the most famous version was by Three Dog Night and they had three vocalists. There was no part for Eric, so he left the stage for a rest. It was a nice discovery when we formed the band that everybody could sing. Pat has great range and power.

You've done some great covers together, you always choose well.

We're all music fans. I always try to stretch the boundaries a little live and with my solo stuff, I've done Madonna, Donna Summer, Carole King… the Spice Girls! A great song is a great song and it's fun to do. The only ones that are off limits for me are things like 'You Make Me Feel Like A Natural Woman'. (laughs) That would raise some eyebrows! Some songs are very sex-specific because of the lyrics, so I did wonder if I did one instrumentally, if I did say 'Papa Don't Preach' by Madonna… it has great chords, the intro is really cool, it's a great groove, Madonna's vocal is amazing, but I just feel a woman has to sing that song. Even if I did it instrumentally, people will sing it in their heads and it would just sound wrong!

This record comes out prior to the new Mr. Big album. Were you working on the two in tandem, or did you get the chance to finish your record first?

I finished this one and literally the next day started on the Mr. Big record! That's about two notes from being finished, so I'm excited about it, it's turned out great!

Was it difficult to get back into Mr. Big mode immediately after this album, writing music for an actual vocalist instead of a guitar line?

No, music is music, guitar is guitar. The only transition I'd have difficulty with would be if I had to switch to something like traditional Jazz, because that's like a foreign language to me. I haven't spent enough time with it, I have with Mr Big and the styles we use. The new album is really nice, Eric really did so well with both the writing and singing. Everyone did great but especially Eric, he's such a talent.

Do you get chance to get together at the same time to record, or do you have to do it via the internet with you all being so busy?

We do both. Everyone is busy, Billy has the Winery Dogs, Eric does a lot of touring around the world, I've got my clinics, Pat has stuff going on. We meet up when we can, other times we're emailing files around. Whatever gets the jobs done.

Finally, as a graphic artist myself, I loved those fantastic Photoshop pictures you used to have on your website, they inspired many of mine! Any chance of you doing any more?

(Laughs) Oh yeah, I haven't swapped my head with anybody for a while, I should do that again, it was fun!

Some of those images were so off the wall, I wondered what on earth you must have searched to find them!

That's the internet for you! It was an exciting thing when it started. Google something - astronauts, what comes up? I was doing it even before I had a computer. When we toured with Rush, one of my favourite bands, we had 'Art Wars'. I'd get a picture of Rush, take it to the local printers and get a bunch of copies. I'd then cut out all their heads and paste them on a different picture, make a load of copies of that and post them backstage. Then they'd do the same thing to us - that was our pre-Photoshop days. It's so much easier now! (laughs)

'Stone Pushing Uphill Man' was released via Mascot Records on August 11th.

Visit Paul online for guitar lessons at http://artistworks.com/guitar-lessons-paul-gilbert

Accept

Accept supported Dokken way back in April 1986, when they had already been established as a working professional band for at least a decade. The fact they are here in 2014, releasing their fourteenth studio album 'Blind Rage' with original recording members, guitarist Wolf Hoffmann and bassist Peter Baltes, is quite a remarkable achievement that shows no sign of ending any time soon. With ex TT Quick singer Mark Tornillo, two comeback albums, 'Blood Of The Nations' and 'Stalingrad' have exceeded expectations since Wolf and Peter put the band back together after a long hiatus – five years in fact between their last concert with Udo Dirkschneider and the release of 'Blood…'. Carl Buxton was afforded an hour of Wolf's time to get the lowdown on the new album and discuss aspects of Accept's incredible career.

The last album 'Stalingrad' was written by yourself and Peter Baltes, with Mark Tornillo doing most of the lyrics. Is that the case with the new album?

Yeah, it's always been the same with us, going back about thirty years – it's an old tradition - we've never really changed the way we work. There's always Peter and I who will get together initially and we'll play each other a bunch of riffs and ideas that we've collected individually and then we start jamming on those, see which ones we like and see which ones feel the most Accept-worthy, if you like. This is what gets the ball rolling usually. Peter is a pretty good demo guy vocally, he's a really good vocalist, period, but he's always doing the scratch vocals when he and I work together which is quite convenient for me because I can hear right away what the song will be like, and what it will sound like when a guy like Mark puts his proper lyrics on himself. So we get a rough idea of where the journey goes, and that's why we don't work too hard on the lyrics except for the main chorus, hook line and all that stuff – that sort of gets developed at that stage. Then it goes through several revisions over weeks and weeks and when we feel like we've got something that's a keeper, then we'll bring it to Mark. He usually just puts final lyrics on it. Sometimes he leaves the scratch vocals pretty much as they are or he comes up with his own suggestions and we all decide which are better. That's how we've always worked, you know.

With regards to Herman Frank being a guitarist as well, I wonder how much input he has?

He's the live guitar player. So he's usually not there in the studio. Then again, it goes all the way back to 'Restless And Wild'. I've played all the guitars on all the records since then. A lot of the other guitar players kept coming and going. A lot of times they weren't ready yet for recording or they'd just left the band. We discovered along the way that it made a whole lot more sense if one guitarist plays all the tracks because it stays so much tighter, and we've just kept that way of working.

Was it different in the early days with Jörg Fischer?

You know for a while he played second guitar, I think up until about 'Breaker' and then sometimes he wasn't there or at some point he left the band or was thrown out, whatever, I can't really remember. All of a sudden there was just me, and so I've played all the stuff ever since. Yeah, I think it was during 'Restless…', then the new guy (Jan Koemmet), he wasn't really all that tight yet and we were thinking "We'll get him there" and before we knew it, he had left again…so it was just one of those things.

With Accept having a reputation as quite an aggressive-sounding band, particularly with Udo's harsh vocals, you've always been the real musical guy, keeping the melody in Accept. A lot of people don't always think of Accept as a melodic band but you've got incredible melody and a lot of that comes through your guitar playing of classical influences that you've incorporated into the music. Spectacularly so on 'Metal Heart' where you used Beethoven's 'Fur Elise' in the main part and Tchaikovsky's 'Slavonic March' on the intro…

Yeah, sure did. You know I started playing acoustic guitar before I started playing electric guitar and I've never been classically trained but I've always had a fondness for classical melodies and classical pieces. Some of those pieces have always attracted me and I've been messing around with those pieces, on guitar, ever since I can remember. Believe it or not, 'Fast As A Shark' has got a lot of classically influenced stuff on the whole middle section and the lead chorus melody line that's incredibly sung, obviously by Udo. I'm sort of playing these melodies under the vocals or alongside the vocals and that sort of became a bit of a trademark of our style over the years. Because we'd arranged it with Udo's way of singing, we just started playing some of these melodies that we'd thought of and that I came up with.

'Trail Of Tears' is one particular song on the new album that's got a lot of that classically influenced melody on it.

Correct. A lot of people don't know exactly what it is but it's to do with the guitars somewhere along the way, but then I don't think it's ever been done as a double bass track like that. For years I'd been thinking what could I possibly do there – it's so beautiful. I can't really play it the way it is because it's a totally different time signature, very slow, not very Metal at all (laughs) so we just Metalled it up now and I think it still works, it's quite different from the original, in the way that it feels and the flow, but it's still recognisable, it's pretty cool. It's a very well-known classical piece…

With regards to the title 'Blind Rage', what was the thinking behind the title?

Not a whole lot of thinking, we just sort of liked it and it went with the album cover. We thought it symbolises what we do. You know Metal is about aggression and rage and there is a lot of rage in this world, still, every day, blind rage all around us it seems to be. To be honest, every song title that would've worked with the album cover that we had, we tried. We were thinking about 'Stampede' but decided against it because it had been done already, some people in Germany don't really know what it means, and it's hard to pronounce or understand it. So we figured 'Blind Rage', it just sort of says it all. It's a good title and hadn't been done. It gets harder and harder these days to come up with a title that hasn't been used too many times.

Very true, especially if you want a one word statement for an album title because they make a bigger impact rather than a title that's seven or eight words long.

And forget anything that has the word 'Metal' in it, in any shape or form! You know who has the best titles? Those video games and movies. Anytime you think of something that would be really cool you look it up and it's already been done by some sort of video game.

Did the artist, Daniel Goldsworthy, come to you with the cover first and you thought 'that's cool, we'll use it for the album' and then decide on the title afterwards?

That's correct. So often in the past my wife *(and manager)* Gaby has been involved in the greatest process of the album cover. She's been involved in all the covers since 'Metal Heart' and that's always been her thing. This time again she got involved and pretty much told the artist what she was thinking about. He delivered the first draft and it was pretty much dead on - maybe not the first but one of the first - and when we all saw that we thought, "Goddam, that's perfect, that's what we'll use, so no more discussions". If that's not blind rage right there then I don't know what is. Sort of steaming nostrils and evil horns. That was pretty bad ass I thought! (laughs).

It's interesting that you mentioned Gaby, as she went under the pseudonym 'Deaffy' which I didn't know for years and years.

We tricked everybody, like, for twenty years. Nobody knew!

Most people assumed it was a guy for starters, and secondly that maybe it was one of the guys involved in the production or management team.

Well, she was always involved in the management. We're like a family. We're quite different from other bands because we don't have the manager in New York City or L.A. somewhere. It's a family affair. Gaby still manages the band and we're still married, for like…forever (laughs)

You mentioned about the song writing process with Peter earlier. I was wondering if the songs were formulated as ideas on the road, or do you wait until you get home in Nashville and sit down before you think about writing songs?

This is the first time I think in our history where we wrote some of it on the road, and it wasn't really "on the road", they were festivals for that summer. We had some time off in between and Peter and I went to a recording studio in Germany for like a week at a time and wrote some of the stuff, started, you know. 'Final Journey' was worked on, that and a bunch of others. All in all I'd say we spent about six or eight months writing songs, which sounds like a lot but it really isn't if you do the gigs in between. We had the luxury for the first time to actually allow for a couple of weeks before we listened to them with fresh ears to go and go through a bunch of revisions. When I look at my hard drives here, there are song versions one, two, three, four, five, six, seven until they finally reach the stage where I'm totally happy but some of the titles like 'Dark Side Of My Heart' - that was a song that was very spontaneous and was written where we were happy with it right away on first draft.

Do you use a drum machine in the studio then Wolf? Obviously there's Peter and yourself there with Peter doing the guide vocals, so I guess the only thing you're missing is the drums?

Yeah we do that with a drum program called EZ Drummer and it works so well. The initial stage is always done with a drum machine. Even back in the 80s we had those ridiculously cheesy simple little drum machines that were a pain in the arse to program. But nowadays there's software that really sounds so amazingly real – scary. You know sometimes we jam with a drummer but it's almost not so good because we always feel slightly guilty because he has to sit around so much and wait for us - it's almost better if there's just the two of us.

With Mark helping out with the lyrics, do you leave it all to him to decide how he's going to interpret them and what emphasis he puts on them?

We usually give him sort of an idea of what the song is all about, not always but sometimes. To give you an example; 'Fall Of The Empire' or '200 Years' we would sort of tell him where the inspiration came from, what the story we want to tell is, what the words are in the chorus. Then he'll run with it and does an amazing job. It doesn't always come out exactly the way we would have done it but that's okay because it's his job, his way of thinking that gets put on paper, not ours, we just think about the bigger picture. And other times, in the case of like 'Stampede' or whatever, we didn't really have an idea of what kind of lyrics we wanted, we just liked the word stampede, wrote the song and Mark thought of the words for that all by himself, we didn't have any idea, but there you go. Other times, there are particularly historic events like in the case of 'Stalingrad' or 'Hellfire' or a song from the new album, 'Trail Of Tears' inspired by the historic event that happened to the native Americans thrown out of their home territory onto the reservations, those kind of stories, where he says he knows it.

With regards to Herman Frank, he came into the equation after the 'Restless And Wild' album, was involved with the 'The Balls To The Wall' album and tour and left again after Gaby persuaded you to take Jörg Fischer back. Although he did the 2005 comeback tour dates what made you decide on Herman?

We know Herman and when we wanted to resurrect Accept he was available. Well actually there was Jörg Fischer that we thought of. But he's sort of disappeared for good, he's nowhere to be found, he's not making music anymore, and Herman was there and we heard he was available, so perfect.

That's a shame to hear about Jorg.

Yeah, I don't know what happened to him but he's out of the music business for good, nobody's got any contact with him and he probably doesn't even play anymore. Herman's still active in the music business and he's still in good shape and available, interested, so he was perfect. And the same with Stefan Schwarzmann, we worked with him in the 90s and on tour for a number of years, everything went well so it was the logical choice.

So let me ask you a question Wolf, you may choose not to answer it, but if you had been in touch with Jörg, and it had been between him and Herman, who would you have chosen?

Ahhh, that's a mean question. I wouldn't know how to answer it because I haven't seen Jörg for so long and he was not available so it's a moot point anyhow.

Accept play The Forum in London on Thursday, November 27th

PHILIP SAYCE

It has been two years since the last album from wonderful Bluesman Philip Sayce. The new record, 'Influence' needs to be worth the wait; it is all that and more. Assured, exciting, varied and unexpected, it cements his appeal. Steve Swift embarrassed him with praise.

"Thank you! I feel really good about it." He sounds genuinely touched. "It was recorded right after 'Steamroller', with the same team, a lot of the same musicians, recorded by Dave Cobb, recorded almost identically. We were thoughtful and careful about what we wanted to do. Coming from the heart. I'm a student, I'm just trying to get better, this is a snapshot of what came just after 'Steamroller'. We ended up recording in Nashville. "

So does it feel like a long time, the wait without new music? Able to touch it but not able to give it to others?

"It really does," he says softly. "We got most of the record done before the end of 2012, so I'm really thrilled that it's being released. It's every bit as honest now as it was then. My intention is to keep growing. I'm as excited about the music now as when I recorded it. I think we (Dave Cobb) were a little confused as to why it took so long. Dave made another Rival Sons record, made about fifteen records that all came out and this one didn't. I'm hugely thankful, such an honour to be able to release my music. I have a new record that's almost done as well as a live record that's done, so, you know, keeping active..."

And this is a statement of entry and position. His invitation to the table. Maybe the top table.

"Wow. I think each and every piece of recorded music I've been associated with I try to give my all, so it means a lot to me. This business is one that can make it very difficult to have a voice; once you start working with people who are more interested in making money, you can have less and less opportunity to make what you want. It's about making a choice for yourself. If someone gives you something, sometimes there are expectations attached. My intention is to put as much of myself in the music as I can. The last thing I would want would be for this album to be about the trials and tribulations of the business. It's about paying respect to where music comes from. Music makes my heart beat. The trick is to try to make a living. I've had a tumultuous couple of years. I'm kind of babbling, but I think you know what I'm saying!"

Blues is in the ascendency at the moment. A lot of people claim the crown which the estimable Mr Bonnamassa may wear at the moment, Clark Jr, Lister, Hofer, Joanne Shaw Taylor are just a few. But what is Blues? Just a genre?

"I'm not trying to fit anything into a box. My favourite artists are the ones who blur the lines. All the music comes from the earth, the heart and the soul, a spiritual plane, something larger than us that connects us all. An opportunity for us all to communicate. The first song (on the album) is called 'Tom Devil', the thirteenth song is called 'Peace In The Valley'; what happened on those is we used samples of recordings by Alan Lomax (great US folk collector) we recorded the vocals around their recordings - 'Tom Devil' is actually a prison recording. It's hard to put onto words how intense those recordings are. There's a lot of talk about what's Blues and what's not Blues, to me there is nothing that turns me off more than when people put up barriers - we need to be supporting each other in Roots music, there's got to be room for it all. Look at people yelling at Bob Dylan when he went electric - (although) not comparing myself to that!"

And that title, 'Influence' is heavy with message.

"That's why there's half covers and half originals, we're paying respect to the influences that shaped my journey. That's why there's a Little Richard track. We're very particular about the tones. Working with Dave and Vance Powell, one of the finest mixers in music today; the team of those cats, and Eddie Spear, it's a team effort - and then there's Richard Dodd who mastered it! An honour to work with them. I'm so thankful to create music and be able to share it."

I saw Philip play the Band On The Wall a couple of years ago. He played a stunner of a show, gorgeous lines and big heart; at the end he said he would see us at the merchandise stand, then jumped off the stage, shaking hands with the audience as he walked through them, then took his place by the t-shirts. It was a stunning moment of connection.

"We'll thank you so much for sharing that! I think even if it's a smile and a hello, it means so much. For people to take the time out of their schedule and come up with ten, twenty, thirty quid to buy tickets, that's something that can't be taken for granted. We haven't been back in the UK in over two years, not through lack of effort - it looks like we may be over in November. I have a DVD I might have along."

And there is a buzz around the album...

"It's the first I've heard of it right now! Feels good to hear that. I hope that people are excited about it, 'cos we are! Let's get together and have a party. We're just getting started!"

He is and lots of us couldn't be happier. His work is classy, his attitude even more so. The album is a wonderful piece of work and should do him proud. But he would never tell you that…

'Influence' is out now on Provogue Records on Limited Edition 180 gram double vinyl (1,000 copies only), CD and digital download.

Photo: Austin Hargrave

Photo: David Probst

Hailing from Jefferson City, Missouri, Shaman's Harvest saw their independent single, 'Dragonfly', sell over 150,000 copies, spurring album sales into the tens of thousands as the Youtube video attracted over 2 million views. Their music has been in TV and films and now the band have signed up with Mascot for the release of their excellent album, 'Smokin' Hearts & Broken Guns'. James Gaden talked to vocalist Nathan Hunt.

All your previous records were on the label Tribal, which was your own independent label, wasn't it?

Yeah, that was just our way to bullshit our way through. Our song 'Dragonfly' is what made things take off, it was a kinda grass roots thing, a lot of people from the industry didn't like the song… or us! But people just kept calling into radio stations and it took off from there.

It was featured in the film 'Legendary', which was a WWE Films release starring WWE Superstar John Cena and Danny Glover. Was 'Dragonfly' a hit before the film, or was it the film that pushed it?

The film definitely gave it longevity. It was already out there beforehand and had actually started to fizzle out, but once it was used in the movie, it gave it another couple of weeks in the Billboard charts.

How did it end up in the film – did you pitch it, or did the studio come to you?

We had done a couple of songs for WWE wrestlers beforehand, providing music for Drew McIntyre and Wade Barrett. Jim Johnson is the music director over there and he also writes the film scores for the movies WWE Films put out. He called and wanted to know if he could use 'Dragonfly'. Err, yeah! (laughs) We had just been recording songs he had written for the wrestlers, so for him to want one of ours was a pretty cool moment. We all grew up watching wrestling. Way back in the 80s, I was a Hulkamanic, loved the Ultimate Warrior, the Bushwackers, those were my guys. So to be able to contribute music to it now is cool.

So with that exposure, is that why you are signing with Mascot as oppose to continuing to do it yourselves?

We had struggled to maintain our independence for a long time. We worked really hard and there's a level that you just can't reach, I don't care what you do or how hard you work, there's a level you can't get to without some connections. What I like about Mascot is they have got some legitimate artists – they've got a lot of great Blues players, but they also have Black Label Society, who are all a bunch of bad asses! To be in with a company like that is just a bonus and I don't feel like we're selling out or any of that shit. Also, they're willing to push Europe, which was really hard for us to get into on our own.

I always have the impression that they aren't a label who interferes in the creative process either.

Yeah, they let us be, man, they let us do our thing. That's rare in this day in age, they aren't looking over your shoulder, micro managing, a lot of labels want to do that. Some of them want somebody in the studio, giving the okay to everything you record. It's a pain in the ass!

I was sent 'Country As Fuck' as a taster to see if Shaman's Harvest might be my thing – I absolutely loved it!

(Laughs) I can't believe that's the one you were sent! (laughs) It started out as a kind of a joke, talking about people from where we live in Missouri. We're all a bunch of southern country boys, so we figured we should write about what we actually know about for once!

I loved 'Dirty Diana' too. It's always difficult doing something by someone as revered as Michael Jackson, but I thought it sounded great in a Rock format.

I think he intended it to have been in that format, I think he did his best to make it that way without cranking it up. We initially started that before he died. It's a song we all listen to on the road – we all have our playlists and that's on everybody's. We thought why the hell not? The things some people have done to Michael Jackson songs, we thought we'd give it a shot and if it doesn't make the record, it doesn't make the record. But it has kind of a swampy sass to it. It's one of the few songs on the record which just happened, there's some live stuff on there, it was all done relaxed because if we didn't like it, we wouldn't use it. Being relaxed often helps songs turn out the best.

You had quite a shock before the album started, because you got cancer.

Yeah – I came down with malignant throat cancer while we were doing the record. I had one tumour removed from my lymph node and the rest had to be taken out with radiation, jumping back and forth between studio and treatment. That was a pretty tough deal. Really, it was just getting in the way of making the record, it was a real pain in the ass!

Getting cancer is bad enough, for a singer to have got it in his throat of all places… that must have really hit hard.

Yeah, it was the worst place for me, but you know, all I did was not focus on that, focus on what I was working on. The hardest part was not being physically able to do my job. My mentality was there, but after treatment, some of those takes, it might be the 50th take before we'd start getting something decent. My throat would close up and usually I can work my way around something or fight through it, but this was a whole different animal. It was pissing me off. I'm cancer free now, all clear and ready to go, hit the road and kick some ass.

Was all the material written before this happened to you, or did this influence some of the songs?

It was smack dab in the middle, and we would go in a studio and write that same day, so it definitely influenced some songs. The anger in some of them came from there. It's weird - you know how there are specific stages of grief? That's how some of the later songs were; each dealing with a different stage.

The album finishes with a new version of 'Dragonfly'. Was it tough to redo the track which is your most successful?

No, we were all pretty much ready to do something new with it. We have plenty of songs that, if they became hits, I'd be sick of singing. But 'Dragonfly' is made up of increasing degrees of intensity. It's not a verse-chorus-verse-chorus cheesy pop number. So for us, it was a bit of a treat to mix it up a bit. We plan on playing 'Dragonfly for another ten years hopefully!

RANDY BACHMAN

Randy Bachman needs no intro from anyone; so many years in the business, still working and famous for a lot more than just 'You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet', he has not exactly reinvented himself but found a workable berth in his 'Vinyl Tap' radio show, telling his lovely stories between the tunes. He has a laid back, open and twinkly way with him and so it seems natural that we'd want to see it - here it is, a DVD and CD of a date from the tour. He explains his appeal to Steve Swift.

The new release does seem like 'An Evening With...' Maybe it's best to store up a career of tales before attempting something as daunting as this...

"Yes, of course. Why would anyone attend an evening with a stranger?" He almost sighs with impatience. "When an audience is familiar with and the music is the soundtrack of their lives, it is entertaining for them to know why, where and when a song was written. Every musician's keyhole to the world with their music is the medium of radio. I had done interviews all my life telling the stories to DJs about how I'd written a certain song of mine. The radio show just expanded on that and I talk about the artist, band, songwriter and my own personal connection with them. Each two-hour show has a theme that allows me to play five decades of Rock and Roll music to explore that theme. I play songs that are not in the mainstream of Classic or Modern Rock radio along with recognizable hits. The show's success and winning awards has been a welcomed and pleasant surprise."

Housed in a nice digipack, this is a quality item. The DVD is a lovely hour or so in Randy's presence, almost as if he were telling you the stories in a bar with just you. You know the narrator in 'The Dukes Of Hazzard'? Like that.

"The DVD tells my involvement as leader, songwriter, musician in two of Canada's most popular and ground-breaking bands. It starts with 'Shakin All Over' and how we got the name The Guess Who, right through to today. My band is on the stage, I casually talk and tell the story, there is an archival visual of the story behind me on a screen as I talk and then we play the hit at the end of the story. The fans know that I've never stopped working. After the end of each band, there were reunions decades later which still continue. I also have a brand new band, and have just cut a new 'heavy Blues' album, which is being produced by Kevin Shirley. I keep on keepin' on."

He does and it's great to see the connection he has with his fans. This is not mining the tribute circuit; this is a celebration, not a cash grab. And his Country inflected songs are just what is popular at the moment.

"This DVD is a celebration of my past successes and their origins. Fans who are aware and have a computer check my website and know when I'm playing a gig, what band is around me and what kind of music it is. I usually honour my past hits as well as play some new material. It has to be a blend of old and new or it's not a full presentation of me or who I am musically."

Carl Douglas said about 'Kung Fu Fighting' that if it's a good song, you only need one. That was a gimmick song, Randy's certainly aren't, but some bands say "there is always stuff we must play or get killed by the crowd" so is 'You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet' an absolute delight or more of a millstone - does it limit musical appeal? He rightly gives the thought short shrift.

"I'm fortunate to have about fifteen songs that fall into the 'one good song' niche," he gently points out. "'American Woman,' 'You Aint Seen Nothin Yet' and 'Takin' Care of Business' are the number 1 hits that everyone knows. Once the show starts, they recognize the other hits as well and I always get, "I didn't know you wrote all those songs" many times. The Guess Who was a Pop-Rock band with varied sounds from song to song. Bachman-Turner Overdrive/BTO was Hard Rock with a continuity of sounds."

The business has changed; there are now no longer advances, people no longer buy CDs in large quantities, the time of the 20 million seller has probably gone, so the model is now a CD as a calling card to get out there and tour. Randy seems to be wise to this, diversifying his media appeal. And he has a real calmness of a man who has seen it all.

"It concerns me but there is nothing I can do about it except to roll with the trend. So, I play live as I always have, the airplay stays the same and the CD or download sales decline. C'est la vie. I have got many new fans from my radio show. They hear it, back track, investigate who I am and then find out the bands and songs I've been part of. It all goes in circles. Or they hear a song on the radio and backtrack for more and find more. I tour this 'story telling' show a lot. Certain organisations and promoters want this sit down show for theatres and corporate events, while others want to rock and we give them what they want."

And his favourite story or song?

"My favorite story is 'Taking Care of Business' as its origins are early on in my career and its finale happened years later and still continues to this day. People have said this song is the real Canadian National Anthem."

You'll just have to wait for the DVD to see what that is, but with all the stories here, they will have you kicking back, smiling and enjoying time with the man. It is a rare talent to wear an ego so softly that they can allow us in and make us feel a part of it. We buy the music, we purchase the tickets, we are part of it and yet so many see us as a necessary evil. The real stayers are the ones who realise we are part of them. Randy is that rare talent.

GREGORY LYNN HALL

A lot of Fireworks readers will be familiar with the name Gregory Lynn Hall. He's the singer best known for his work with the band 101 South who released three highly regarded albums in the mid noughties. Ian Johnson talks with Gregory about his brand new solo album 'Heaven To Earth', 101 South and his musical influences.

You've been in the music business for a while; was the idea of sitting down to make your own solo album daunting?

Well after all the albums I'd done with Roger Scott Craig for 101 South, this just seemed like the natural thing to do. I've always written songs so I knew I would have things to put on the album, but they would be heavier than what I'd done before, because I'm primarily a guitar player and when you write on a guitar it's different than when you write on a piano. It's harder and the songs have a tougher sound. So when I'd finished working with Roger and 101 South in late 2008, I decided to have some time off and just worked on my own music. Then I sent some songs out to people I knew and trusted, who liked what I was doing and the rest is history.

Are the songs on the album a mixture of old and new songs or just new ones?

There are a couple of riffs that I wrote way back almost twenty-five years, the title track and 'Cry No More'. Apart from that all the others are new compositions. I just wanted to write an album that sounded a bit like the stuff I grew up listening to, like Rainbow and Bad Company, with that old sounding vibe.

You play pretty much everything on the album apart from a few of the guitar solos which are handled by the likes of Craig Goldy and Billy Liesgang. Was it easier to work this way?

To tell you the truth it was nice for me to do it this way because when you write a song you hear it in your head a certain way and when you, if you're in a band, give it to whoever your working with, it never sounds the same as when you were thinking about it. So playing all the instruments myself gave the songs the sound I had in my head all along, which made it more of a solo thing for me. It's nice however to be able to call on such great friends as Jeff Duncan, Craig Goldy and Billy Liesgang to help out because they add their own little bit of spice to the dish just to finish it off, so working with those guys is great.

I have to say though that doing a solo record is a lot of hard work, especially when you haven't done anything like it before, you know? Long days and nights working in the studio setting things out, feeling my way and hoping I got things right.

Did Craig, Billy and the other guests come to your studio or was it all done over the Internet?

For the most part it was done on the Internet. That's the nature of the beast these days. Craig had just finished touring in Europe with Dio Disciples when I asked if he'd help out, and the great guy he is, he said "Yeah, send over some songs and I'll see what I can do". He played the solo on the title track for me. Jeff Duncan lives close by me, I live in Las Vegas now and he was the only guy who came to my house to record his stuff. Everyone else who helped like Billy and Mike Turner did their thing via the net.

So where was the album recorded?

I have my own home studio, a little thing I built and it was all done there. Actually this really is the first thing I've really produced all by myself and it was done for no money at all. I was feeling my way while doing it and just hoping I got things right.

You've worked with Carmine Appice, Stuart Smith (Heaven and Earth, Sweet), Richie Onori (Rick Derringer, ELP, Heaven and Earth), Kelly Keeling… who has been the biggest influence on you?

Wow! Tough question! Ronnie James Dio as I'm a singer, but people like Spencer Davis, Keith Emerson and Carmine who I have had the pleasure of working with all stand out for me. Recently I went to Vegas to see a show called 'The Rock Ball' and Howard Leese of Heart was playing the guitar in the show and man, I was sitting right in front of his amps getting the house sound and he was amazing. His feel and technique was just fantastic and he was just a pro; never over doing anything, just playing from the heart. It's guys like that who inspire me and still do to this day. Looking back I've been very lucky to play with a lot of great musicians.

Any plans for a new 101 South album?

Funnily enough I just talked with Roger Scott Craig a couple of days ago who said that we're going to be doing a best of with some new tracks. Primarily I will be concentrating on my solo album but then I'll help Roger out with this best of and then who knows? If that does well I would love to do a new 101 record. I think we did some really good work with that band and the fans seemed to love what we were doing, so yeah, we probably, might (laughs) make another 101 album.

Will there be more solo albums from you, Gregory?

Yes. I hope so, because I did work really hard on it and for my first try with a very small budget, doing virtually everything myself, I don't think I did a bad job really. Hopefully this will open doors for me and I can then maybe meet and work with new musicians and start making another solo record and also help Roger out with 101 South. I would love to get out on the road in support of the record, though I'd need a band to back me of course, which is what I'm actually trying to do right now, to put a band together to tour this album. I want to get busy is the real answer to your question Ian, I want to do more with my music, I want to learn and become a better musician. I'm always writing new songs so I'll keep on working as hard as I can and I just hope people like the album and maybe I'll see them sometime, somewhere out on the road.

You could see them live in recent years but now you can enjoy the brand new recordings from them – that's what we call a full-blown reunion! After two decades of not hitting the 'record' button, the American hard rockers Kix return with their new album 'Rock Your Face Off' and that's what Alexandra Mrozowska caught up with Kix singer Steve Whiteman to talk about.

The most predictable question goes first – after the reunion and remaining a touring outfit only, what prompted you to come back to recording?

I guess we never really went away! We all started our own musical projects – I was in a band called Funny Money and we did four or five albums. But we got regular requests in our home area for more Kix shows and it went from there. The first show that was out of our area just exploded and little by little everything just started to grow. The live shows got our creative juices flowing again, and it took a couple of years, but the album happened and now we'll just see what happens!

The last Kix studio album was 1995's 'Show Business'. Do you see 'Rock Your Face Off' as picking up where you left off, or a sign of the band's evolution music-wise?

It's more of an evolution. The main songwriter from the last album is no longer in the band, so this time we had an opportunity to all collaborate and see what we could come up with as a unit. Keeping the same producer, Taylor Rhodes, meant that we kept ourselves in that classic Kix vein, which is what we knew the fans wanted. He gave us direction and kept us in that high energy, feel good vein – we're just a fun band! We'd like people to listen to the album and feel better.

'Rock Your Face Off' had each Kix member contributing to the songwriting. How did it impact the newly created material?

I guess that's for the fans to say! There was no conscious effort to do something wildly different that's for sure, this is a Kix album and we wanted it to sound like one. We'd all been writing, we had thirty or forty songs that we brought to the studio at the start of the process and involved the producer in the decision about which would work together to make the best possible album.

What are your personal highlights of 'Rock Your Face Off'? Are you satisfied with it?

I like 'Love Me With Your Top Down'; that was brought in by Mark. I brought in about four songs. Really this was a joint effort. I love 'Can't Stop The Show' too; we now open our live sets with that.

'…Top Down' is the first single off the album. Was that your choice?

We chose this track with the label. It just works; and was going over great at the live shows. We have done about fifteen or twenty shows now since reuniting. The fans have been great, and that's why we're back. There's no pressure on us, we mean to just enjoy it.

The lyric video to the song is already made. Do you plan to support the album with any 'proper' music video? What do you think about the possible impact of videos in the days of MTV's demise and YouTube?

The lyric video's enough. It's great and I don't see the point in videos at the moment. The market just isn't there for them anymore.

'Rock Your Face Off' is out via Loud & Proud Records. Are you satisfied with the label?

We have a history with Tom Lipsky who runs the label. It started when we signed to CMC International which – for lots of reasons – turned out to be a difficult time. A few years down the track of course we jumped at the chance to work with him again.

Since 'Show Business' much has changed within the music industry, with the majority of press and promotion shifting to the Internet. Do you think these are changes for the better?

I think it's all good. People don't need to go into a studio to make an album these days. For this album we did pretty much everything, bar the drums, from home studios. Also, social media is a great way to get news and music to the fans. I admit the new landscape took me a while to get used to, but once I'd understood and grasped the opportunities, I liked it!

Is there one of the seven Kix albums which remains your favourite?

Well, 'Blow My Fuse' got us out of the clubs and into the arenas. It got us on the map. So that's my favourite, just for what it helped us achieve.

Has your approach to music or song writing changed throughout the years?

We know what the fans expect; we were all brought up in that same era. So it's not a departure as such and that gave us all the confidence to contribute.

What are your memories from the very first gig you played as Kix after the 2003 reunion?

When we first got back together, we knew we would be playing in front of home crowds in our area. It was like old times and that helped us ease back into it. So when we did step out of our comfort zone, we were ready, a well-oiled machine. The show we did at Rocklahoma was an eye opener. Truly it made the hair on my arms stand up! The reception really made us realise that we were onto something. At that stage we hadn't really thought about a new album – we were just playing our old material because the fans love it, and we love it, so we just all dug the experience. Now with the new album there's a new focus. We honestly don't know what comes next. We hope this album will buy us some more years out in front of the fans. If we could keep going, like The Stones and Aerosmith, that would be great!

BLUES PILLS

Blues Pills came to the attention of Firework's Ray Paul via a short support slot to the band Orchid, where he and everybody in the audience became still, as Elin let loose her incredible vocals. Since then, Blues Pills have been gathering fantastic reviews for both their live performances, and the music contained in their EP releases. Ray had a chance to sit down with guitarist Dorian Sorriaux and singer Elin Larrson to find out how the band formed, and what makes them tick.

How did Blues Pills form?

Elin: I lost my job in Sweden, and I was feeling pretty depressed. I decided to rent out my apartment and took a trip to California - a place I had always wanted to visit. That's where I met future Blues Pills members Zac Anderson and Cory Berry. We hit it off immediately and became good friends. We got into the music side of things, they had connections, and we recorded some music and put it onto YouTube, something I was a bit reluctant to embrace at first, but it got us some attention, which was good. We put our band on the road and toured Spain and Portugal, and the guys knew Dorian and got him to join in with us. Everything came together very quickly from that point.

How did you both become musicians?

Dorian: I was about nine when I took up guitar. I used to play snare drum when I was young, and I got into Rock and Blues through listening to ZZ Top.

Elin: I always had musical people around me, and singing was something that made me feel good inside. This is embarrassing, but when I was ten I loved to sing Madonna's 'Like A Virgin' (laughing). I liked the feeling I got and continued to sing from then on.

How would you describe your music to someone that had not heard you before?

Elin: Music with a lot of feeling, mixed with Blues Rock and Soul, and a sixties/seventies vibe.

How much of the album is new material?

Elin: Well, some songs like 'Devil Man' will be familiar from our EP releases, but we had a whole batch of other songs that nobody had heard. We were just waiting to use them when we were able to record a full album. We worked on some of the previously released songs, and they are slightly rearranged, though you may not notice.

One of my favourite songs on the new album is 'No Hope Left To Me'. Do you have any songs that are special for you?

Elin: 'High Class Woman' for me is a favourite, as it has that early Fleetwood Mac sound which is a big influence on us as a band.

Can you tell us about the wonderful artwork?

Elin: Zac, our bass player, came up with an idea to use artist Marijke Koger-Dunham. She is a legendary visionary, and hippie, who created album art and costumes for the Beatles, even painting George Harrison and Eric Clapton's guitars! We had some ideas for what we wanted her to create but we ended up using a piece of her art that she had created back in the sixties, which had never been used before. We were blown away by the artwork and feel very honoured she let us have it.

The album will look great on vinyl, don't you think?

Elin: Oh yes, and the artwork will cover the whole album, so it will be very cool, especially on vinyl.

Will you still release EPs in the future?

Elin: I don't know to be honest. I think we will most likely just move on with another complete album.

Do you think Blues Pills are a band that is at it's best live?

Elin: Live is always special. That said, we made the new album recordings as close to our live sound as we could.

Dorian: Most of the songs in a live environment will really find their place, and they will bring on a whole new feel, I think.

How important are the lyrics to you?

Elin: Very important to me. Hopefully people will understand what I sing. I try hard to make them clear, despite my accent. The song has to have meaning for me to sing it with any conviction.

You have done a lot of touring, including Australia. What have been your best moments?

Dorian: I think for both of us it has been when our parents have seen us, because they can see what it is we do, and understand what it means to us and the fans.

Elin: It's the connection with the audience, so really every show has is special moments, but yes, when my parents saw me sing, that stood out for me. Live shows are always a state of mind where I lose myself, and I just take off into another world.

What are your influences musically?

Elin: I suppose it would have to be Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac. If you listen to our songs, there is a strong influence from this band in Dorian's guitar playing especially, I think.

Elin, you often get compared to Janis Joplin. Ever thought of covering one of her songs?

Oh no! I am a big fan, and she was a singer that could take any song and make it her own, but for me to take on a Janis Joplin song... I just don't think I could really do it justice!

What is next for Blues Pills?

Well, Dorian has to do his exams and then we have some shows booked including a launch party for the new album in London, which actually sold out in a day! That is very exciting for us. We also have quite a few festivals like Hellfest coming up, and they are always a good way to get your music across to new people that have not heard us. Finally, we want to come back and do a full UK tour for all you guys.

THEORY OF A DEADMAN

Regular as clockwork Theory Of A Deadman simply keep on putting albums out. They must be doing something right despite the criticism; "Poor man's Nickelback", "defunct Modern Rockers" and "misogynistic women haters" are just some of the insults thrown at the band. There's no denying that Tyler Connolly's voice bears more than a passing resemblance to Chad Kroeger's and even the band's Chad Kroeger owned, 604 Records, association appears to back up the claims. But scratch under the surface and it's different; Theory don't take things quite as seriously as their more successful Canadian counterparts and in the cartoon-like Tyler Connolly they have an instantly recognisable, charismatic leader with a wicked sense of humour, evident in the tongue in cheek lyrics of their songs. Mike Newdeck chatted with Connolly about the new album 'Savages' and what's in store for the band in the near future.

Why have you chosen Howard Benson again to produce, wasn't it time for a change?

Well I suppose it was but we seem to click with Howard and he knows how we work, how we play and how we do stuff. I'd love to work with Mutt Lange but he wouldn't know who we were. We're just not big enough really to go elsewhere and Howard fits the bill well.

Who did you write with this time?

Well, I've always co-written with people, it's something Howard pushes us to do, it gives us different perspective. I wrote with my ex-wife again, as I have done on previous albums and I also wrote stuff with the other guys and on my own really.

Co-writing is something that's openly encouraged these days by labels and producers.

Yeah, it's encouraged by many labels, but to be honest the idea always comes from Howard and of course I know quite a few people who I can write with so that helps. Labels don't trust the band to write great songs, even though that's what got us off the ground to start with. They'd rather get you to double up with someone because they think they're going to get better songs that way. Sometimes it gets you down a little because you think that you can do it alone. I've got no problem with co-writing because other people have great ideas and you have to embrace that and get it done.

Did you have a game plan for the album?

The aim was to step back, I think, and try and get some of our old sound back. 'The Truth Is' was a great record for us and it was a little different and way more tongue in cheek but it never pays to stay the same, you have to change, otherwise it gets boring to play and boring to listen to. I think 'Savages' is different again.

How was 'The Truth Is' received? After all, it was a bit of a departure from 'Scars And Souvenirs'?

It was received incredibly well and probably did better than expected despite the critical reviews. 'Lowlife' was a big hit for us and as album sales aren't that great in the States we thought it was a push in the right direction.

How has 'Savages' developed from the more tongue in cheek 'The Truth Is'?

Well, like I said you can't really make the same album twice and so we wanted to lose some of the tongue in cheek fun element of that album and move onto something a little bit more varied but still recognizably us. It's got a dark element and then some other material that we haven't really tried before.

'Blow' seems to be the only song that links this album to the previous one, containing some clever humorous lyrics including the line, "World is so unbearable like wearing socks with sandals."

It could easily have been on the last album but I wrote this song when I was in a particular mood. It pokes fun at the current culture of doing nothing to become famous whilst highlighting the frustration with it. Dumbing down our intelligence just to make us relevant…that line kind of describes it perfectly. This throwaway society gets frustrating but it's all a bit of fun having a pop at it.

Why has it been titled 'Savages'?

It's basically the title of the song which is a kind of apocalyptic prophecy about what it would be like if anarchy reigned at the end of the world and how humans would behave. I got in touch with Alice Cooper to do something for us, and he seemed really excited by it. I went to his house in Arizona and we put it together. He was really great and seemed to enjoy doing it. It certainly gives the album a bit of kudos with him on it that's for sure. It gives the song a whole Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' vibe when his voice appears in the middle of it.

Do you follow a trend or do you just write what you write?

I don't really write to a formula and I don't really get influenced by what's going on at the time. I really tend to write what I'm feeling at the time. Happy, depressed, jokey melancholic, if I feel like any of these it comes out in the songs. I've always been like that and I don't think that I'll change.

'Angel' feels like a hit. Tell me about that song, the label probably insisted it went on the album?

We give the label a load of songs and they pick the ones that they like; everyone really liked that song, it's very Pop orientated with some unusual sounds and a different beat. I think it could do well on the mainstream chart. That's like I said though, this album is very varied and so there isn't anything else like that on the album. It's a bit of a love song, about letting someone go who you're in love with but you have to let them go because you're not right for each other. I know I write some stuff that's been called misogynistic but hey, I do like writing love songs as well. An even more stripped down love song is 'The One' which I was actually surprised that the record label liked so much. In fact, they really loved it.

How much pressure is on you to come up with the hit, and how much of that is personal pressure?

I've got to be honest, I really do write a whole bunch of stuff and some of it could be a hit record and some of it isn't, but as a whole you need a good mix anyway. You've got to have the Rock stuff and you've got to have the stuff that's got a bit of commercial appeal, but it almost happens by accident… so really I just get on with the writing and see what comes out the other end. No one says "Hey, you have to write a hit and this is what it should sound like", but I know certain bands have been put into that position. I don't feel any personal pressure, what happens, happens. I have faith in what I do and we've been doing it enough times now to know what works and what doesn't and that comes from the fans, not the label.

A couple of the songs, 'Drown' and 'The Sun Has Set On Me', have an Alice in Chains vibe, how did that come about?

Like I said, it's all about the mood that I'm in when I write and at that point I felt like I was isolated, washed away and left to get on with things on my own. We all have those feelings of sinking lower in because that's the easy option. The lyrics compliment the dark heaviness of the guitar and give that claustrophobic feeling. 'The Sun Has Set On Me' is a similarly dark song that almost sounds the death knell for human emotions; the end of bothering to feel anything at all, the ultimate ending after 'Drown'. These two songs book end the album and it kind of makes the whole thing work, there's no concept really but it give it a common thread.

'Living My Love Like a Country Song', how was that conceived? How did you get Don Rooney from the Rascal Flatts involved?

Well, we're all big Country music fans

and Howard thought that it would be great to write one and get Don involved. We have done Country-tinged stuff before, it's always been in our music but this time we wanted to go the whole hog and so when we did it in the studio Don came in with all the gear to make it sound like one. He had the pedal steel guitars and he really made it sound like a proper Country song. We won't have a hit with it but it was great fun and you never know, someone might cover it and get lucky. The song turned out to be great; I mean it's a Country music song but it's got the tongue in cheek thing that we do.

How do you cope with the constant touring?

Well it can be tiring, but it's what we do and really it's all I've ever known for well over ten years. We love touring and we've met some great friends on the road. It can be hard on the family though, I found that out with my now ex-wife and if you've got kids, like the other guys, it's difficult being away from them for long periods. But we plan in breaks to make sure they see them and at the end of the day it is our job. I feel honoured to be able to do this as my job.

The core of the band has been together from the start, what keeps you all going?

I guess we're just really good friends and we all get along. If you live in each other's pockets on the road you have to be close, otherwise it wouldn't work. What keeps us all going is the music and being on the road doing what we do. Like everyone we have our disagreements but the secret is to move on; forgive and forget…or just forget.

What's the climate like currently in the US for Rock music?

Well it's a struggle that's for sure, mainstream Rock isn't the big animal that it used to be and many bands are struggling. The labels are consolidating what they've got and they're not signing new bands because of the financing of it. If they do sign a band it's so that they can control them by getting all the songs written for them and just getting them to play it. It's a bit sanitized and then of course reality TV has a big say these days and it can be a little manufactured.

Your popularity in the UK has risen over the last couple of albums, why do you think that is?

I think its exposure really, we keep coming over and playing and selling tickets either as part of a multi band bill or on our own. People have got to know us and many of the fans of Shinedown and Black Stone Cherry have come aboard. If you don't work at it then people won't bother to come and see you, you disappear from their mind.

Do you have to treat the UK a little differently from the US?

Yes, but from the perspective of playing music, no not really. We play it and they come and watch and buy the records in the UK just as they do in the States but in America you have to work harder because if you disappear from people's minds for too long then they forget you. I think in British fans are more loyal and stick with you.

Looking forward to the UK visit in the fall? What sort of set can we expect?

We're really looking forward to it, we love the UK and we love playing arenas. We will probably tour on our own at some point, probably in early 2015, but it's not finalised yet. As for the set list we haven't worked that out yet, but we might just mix it up a bit and throw in some other songs just to keep things fresh. We're going to play plenty from 'Savages' though.

Theory will be out with label mates Airbourne and Black Stone Cherry for a series of arena shows this autumn.

Thu 23rd Oct
DUBLIN Academy

Fri 24th Oct
BELFAST Mandela Hall

Sun 26th Oct
GLASGOW SSE Hydro

Mon 27th Oct
SHEFFIELD Motorpoint Arena

Tue 28th Oct
CARDIFF Motorpoint Arena

Thu 30th Oct
BIRMINGHAM LG Arena

Fri 31st Oct
MANCHESTER Phones4U Arena

Sat 1st Nov
LONDON Wembley Arena

Black State Highway is a new, youthful British Female-Fronted band fronted by Latvian singer Liva Steinberga. They pump out a raucous brand of Hard Rock and recently signed a deal with Cherry Red Records. Black State Highway have now released their self titled debut and Dave Scott fired some questions over to the band's vocalist Liva, and guitarist Olie Trethewey.

I have heard your self-titled debut, but for our readers who haven't, how would you describe the sound of Black State Highway and what influences are there behind it?

Olie: I would say riffy and Bluesy, sometimes Stinky Rock. If I'm referring to the album I would also say that our sound is quite natural and live, because that is how it was recorded. We wanted to make something that actually represents what we sound like, with no tricks. In terms of influences there are so many. We are of course influenced by and still take a lot from some of the great Rock bands like Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, Lynyrd Skynyrd and so on but our personal tastes differ and go much deeper than Classic Rock. Whatever music we are listening to at a particular time, impacts on what kind of music we write.

The album is due out very soon, how does that feel and what sort of thoughts are going through your mind as that important moment draws near?

Liva: As I'm sitting here it actually dawned on me that it is not that long till the launch. I remember when we first signed our contract with HNE and Cherry Red, it seemed miles away and now it's just around the corner! It's exciting though! I have got so many thoughts going through my mind as the launch draws near; its excitement, a crazy nervous kinda situation but most of all what I want to do is share this album with everyone and hope they love it as much as I do!

Liva, where do you draw your inspiration from for lyrics?

Liva: Lyrics and the vocal melodies are kind of my forte but we all do a lot of work together, as of late everyone has been more involved in the lyric writing process and themes of the songs, which is great. As for the inspiration, I kind of apply a real life situation that I turn it into a fictional one. I am a massive daydreamer and my imagination is what keeps me who I am. But all songs do come from real life situations; it's how I choose to word it and apply it to the song that is more fictional.

Your single, 'Ain't Got No', was selected as one of the tracks of the week for Classic Rock recently; how did it feel to have your single chosen for this?

Olie: It was indeed, and it was great! It came as quite a surprise really. We thought it would be a long time before we would be getting recognized by people like Classic Rock and Team Rock. I think it was really just a result of the hard work of our main man Matt Ingham at Cherry Red doing our PR, and of course I hope due to the quality of the track. It was really exciting to see us up there alongside superstars like Slash. Things like this make you feel so good because as a musician you work really hard on an album and put your heart and soul into it, not to mention money. Getting featured on Classic Rock was one of the things that has shown us that what we are doing could be, and seemingly is, worthwhile because other people like it, it's not just us!

Liva: It's an amazing honour. Talking about the exact moment when we got an email from our absolute legend PR guy Ingham about being featured, it was about 2pm in the afternoon and I was at work – I work in a bar; I stopped what I was doing, had an exciting little dance and a glass of Prosecco, because I believe a moment like that needs to be celebrated with bubbles!

A lot of attention can fall on the vocalist in a band; Liva, how do you feel as you start out, about the potential to have a lot of focus on you being the band's singer?

Liva: It's obviously a pressure in some ways, but as of yet I haven't experienced it that much, it all comes with the territory I guess. I'm not too scared as I have the opportunity to represent my band whilst doing what I love with people that are likeminded. But in general it's just exciting; to be recognized for the work you do is probably the biggest compliment an artist can have, so bring on the attention!

How have you found the music industry being newcomers?

Olie: It's just been a huge learning curve. I mean we've all actually studied the music business at some level but it's very different when you really start to operate within it, luckily we are being led by a great manager. Maybe "led" is the wrong word, dragged might be more appropriate sometimes, but we are improving and becoming more professional all the time, so hopefully we can do her proud! The overall musical climate for new bands is difficult really. There are so many bands around now that the internet is saturated with music, making it so hard to stand out. I also think that the internet encourages people to stay indoors. You no longer have to go to a gig, or go to a record store or buy a magazine to discover bands. Instead people can go online, skip through a bit of one song and decide they don't like it or if they do like it, they can download it for free, rendering it worthless. Music has completely lost its value and it's such a shame. Luckily for us, Rock fans tend to be really passionate about music, as we are, which means they too love to own their music, and want to experience live music and socialize with likeminded music lovers…not just online but in real life. On the flip side, it is a great tool for new bands and allows us to do amazing amounts of promotion and get ourselves out there without paying for marketing, not to mention the way in which we can personally connect with fans in any part of the world. I can see from my short time in the industry that success still comes down to hard work, gigging as much as possible and having good connections, or a team of people working with you who have those connections and expertise.

The self titled debut album from Black State Highway is out now through Hear No Evil/Cherry Red Records.

Can thirteen be a lucky number? Frédéric Slama seems to know a lot about the subject, as the thirteenth album from his project AOR, 'L.A. Connection', hits the shelves this July. Alexandra Mrozowska caught up with Frédéric to get to know more about 'L.A. Connection' as well as to talk about the future of AOR – and have a few laughs along the way...

Can you tell us more about making the "lucky thirteen" in your discography, 'L.A. Connection', which was released on July the 18th?

This album was a labour of love. It took me almost two years to complete it. In fact I started it when I recorded my most successful record to date, 'The Secrets Of L.A'. I was working almost on both albums at the same time but with a very different approach – I wanted more of a big Melodic Rock sound for this one. As usual I recorded fifteen-twenty songs for this album and only kept the nine best for 'L.A. Connection'. Plus these nine songs are quite long... well, not as long as a Pink Floyd song (laughs), but you will find there are incredible guitar solos, mostly done by my good friend Tommy Denander.

What are the album's strongest points?

I could tell you "it's hard to choose" or "I love them all" but we've seen this answer in interviews so many times that we're all sick of it! So I'm going to take risks and choose a few songs I really love – of course after that I might have to hide in a foreign country because I didn't talk about some great singers that are part of the album. But for you and Fireworks, I'm willing to take chances! (laughs) The strong points of the album are, of course, the nine singers who gave extraordinary performances. I'm very fond of 'Closer to Zero' sung by David Forbes (Boulevard). It's Melodic Rock at its best and David is back in top form! My other favourite is 'The Pride Of Strangers' sung by my good friend, the ultra-talented Paul Sabu. It takes you back to the good old days of Journey, Survivor or Foreigner with Sabu's touch. Also, the song I would take on a desert island - if I could take my own songs there! - would be 'Once Off Guard'. I think the lyrics have something special and the melody soars thanks to the voice of the legendary Jeff Paris.

Was it difficult to get Paul Sabu or Jeff Paris on board?

Actually, it was David Forbes from Boulevard that I had the hardest time to get. It took me almost two years to find him – I posted search notices everywhere from Facebook to message boards on the net. When I finally found him, I discovered to my surprise that another band had stolen my idea that's been all over the net for more than a year, and recorded a song with him... and released it before I did. There are copycats everywhere. Of course I don't own David Forbes, he's free to sing on all the projects he likes. Still, it was a big surprise for many of us and it proves that when you advertise on the net that "AOR wants to record with David Forbes", it gives ideas to others (laughs). Concerning Paul Sabu, I consider him as a good friend and it's always an honour to have him on board. By the way, the two fantastic extra bonus tracks on the Japanese pressing are also sung by Paul. Check them out. It's monster vocals from a killer artist! As for Jeff Paris, he's a good friend of Tommy Denander, my AOR partner, so it was easy to get him. But it's still a huge honour to have such a performer on my album!

What do you think is the secret of your successful and continuous collaboration with Tommy Denander?

Tommy and I have a lot of values in common and we've been friends for more than fifteen years. He's the missing link I was looking for, for AOR and thanks to his friendship and talent, my project is among the best of the genre!

Do you ever revisit the early AOR albums and would you find there something you'd improve on now?

Yes, over the years I felt that I did all that I had to do in the Westcoast style. So during the last few years AOR became harder and harder... well, it's not Metallica yet, you have to wait a little bit more for that! (laughs) So my last three albums are more Melodic Rock-oriented with big influences from bands that I love like Survivor, Journey, Boston, Foreigner, Whitesnake, Night Ranger, among many others. I'm a perfectionist, so I would re-do a lot of things on my previous albums... but at the same time you have to let go at one point or another. So they are the best I could do at a specific moment in time and I'm very proud of them all – as if they were my children!

Writing for other artists, AOR and beyond, how personal do you get in your lyrics?

Well, I'm influenced with what I see around me, other people's stories and of course my own life, to which I add a little bit of passion, romance and a twist. You can have two readings of them, a superficial one and a deeper one where you can find hidden meanings and even secret messages. I received quite a few e-mails about how I touched the heart and soul of some fans. And that's my greatest reward possible!

Weren't you ever afraid that the formula of AOR project would become stale or repetitive one day?

Please ask me the same question when I turn 90! (laughs) For now it's a formula I created in 1984 with my first solo album and I must've been one of the very first to apply it and stick with it over the years. So I think I'll stop doing that for AOR the day all my heroes have played or sung on my albums.

Having worked with so many big names of Rock genre, is there anyone else you've never collaborated with that you would love to in the future?

Yes, you! (laughs) Otherwise, there are so many of them! In no particular order: David Coverdale, Don Henley, Jimi Jamison, Joe Lynn Turner, Eddie Money, Bobby Kimball, Andrea Corr, Steve Perry, Lou Gramm, Paul Rodgers, Fiona - still waiting for you, girl! - , Orianthi, Johnny Van Zant, Eddie Van Halen... And Tommy Denander... wait a minute, didn't Tommy play on my last ten albums? I think so! (laughs)

What does the future hold in store for Frederic Slama?

That's the beauty of the future; we don't know what it has in store for us! But I plan to go on writing for artists around the world and these days I'm working with an incredible English singer who works in musicals in London – I'm helping her out with her first album that might be released in 2015. And I plan to release seven AOR CD's per year to keep you busy... well, one per year would be nice! (laughs)

Ted Nugent

Ted Nugent is one of Rock's legendary figures. Known for his ferocious guitar playing, high energy shows and his outspoken opinions, the Motor City Madman released his 14th studio album 'Shutup&jam!' via Frontiers Records. James Gaden was on hand for Ted to wax lyrical about it…

You have a pretty good idea what you are going to get with a Ted Nugent record – it's not going to be big on ballads, you aren't going to find too many saxophone solos. Expect killer guitar licks and high impact Rock and Roll. 'Shutup&jam!' is no different – it literally starts with Ted yelling that very phrase before unleashing one of his textbook riffs. I inquire if, after making headlines so often with his opinions, it was a statement regarding a view that he would now rather concentrate on the music. Ted, however, naturally had something more to say on the subject.

"A real American worthy of the freedom has an obligation to participate in this sacred experiment in self-government," he enthuses. "Each of us, 'we the people', have a duty to demand accountability from our elected employees to adhere to their oath to the US Constitution, and every self-inflicted malady plaguing America today is a direct result of the scourge of apathy that allowed Barack Obama and his gang of America hating, freedom hating, independence hating criminals to fundamentally transform us into the mess we are in. I have been doing my job fulltime for the last forty plus years, refusing to back down or give up, so it is very important for me to cleanse my soul and recharge my spirit batteries with my powerful musical force, hence; Shutup&jam! And do it as often as possible as long as I'm getting my American job done."

The record has all of Nugent's trademark energy present, wrapped up in a clear, powerful production. It's almost like 'Shutup&jam!' was the ethos in the recording studio too, of laying it down spontaneously, rather than indulging in lots of pre-production.

"Each guitar jam is like the first time with a new loud amp as a kid in the garage," Ted explains, "so the licks are pure, primal, raw, spontaneous, and that describes my songwriting stream of consciousness, or should I say sub-consciousness! I think not, but rather unleash with a purely open mind and uninhibited craving for intense, driving patterns, grooves and chord changes. The lyrics unfold on their own as well. I simply strive for feel, groove, pulse, authenticity, spirit and soul in my music, in my stage-show and everything I do."

With live performances being one of the most celebrated things about Nugent's career, you could be forgiven for thinking he might worry how to capture that in a studio, but if the sound of 'Shutup&jam' is anything to go by, that's not a concern.

"I have always been so very blessed to surround myself with not just super gifted, ultra-talented musical geniuses, but they are also great gentlemen," Nugent replies. "They all have incredible work ethics and a ferocious love of soulful, grinding, high energy music, so the energy in the room is off the charts."

Anytime you see Ted Nugent, he always appears as an upbeat, positive person. The lyric to the second track, 'Fear Itself' seems to encapsulate his lifestyle and attitude perfectly.

Yes I would agree with that," enthuses Ted. "I really do get up everyday with a smile on face, happy to be alive, back in the race!"

'Shutup&jam!' is notable also for the return of Derek St Holmes, whose vocals have graced many a Nugent classic. His performance on 'Everything Matters' is superb.

"Derek is my Motown blood-brother and he has always joined us on the classics, off and on pretty much every tour," Ted elaborates. "'Stranglehold' is a monster unto itself every night, but that magical St Holmes vocal touch elevates into the uncharted stratosphere of Soul music. We simply agreed enough with the occasional appearance, let's do this fulltime again, and everyone is genuinely moved. The world hasn't grasped Derek's incredible guitar talents as yet, for he is one of *the* best guitarists anywhere, anytime. We create killer fire-breathing music together."

Speaking of great guitarist/singers, 'She's Gone' features Nugent's longtime friend

Sammy Hagar, a similarly upbeat and energetic figure. I point out to Ted that it's amazing, given the amount of work that the pair of them have put out, that they haven't recorded together before now.

"Sammy and I come from the same American black Soul music, Blues, R&B&R&R school of authoritative music, so our threat to make killer music together was indeed long overdue!" he agrees.

Nugent is well known for his love of hunting and as a fervent meat eater myself, I couldn't help but smile at the amusing track 'I Love My BBQ' which ends with Ted's statement that 'Tofu just might kill you.' In Michael Bolton's highly entertaining autobiography 'The Soul Of It All', the singer recounts a tale where he auditioned to be in Nugent's band in the early 1980s. On arriving at Ted's house, which was decorated by numerous animal heads from hunting, they sat down to eat and Ted noticed Bolton had eaten everything except the meat. When Nugent inquired if something was wrong, Bolton explained he was a vegetarian. Ted's classic response was 'Well what do you have on your walls, cabbages?' resulting in everyone laughing.

"To each his own," Nugent says casually. "I cannot imagine anyone honestly making a judgment of someone based on their diet, this side of cannibalism of course. If Paul McCartney came up here today I would say, 'Paul, have a seat, we'll get you some tofu, you son of a bitch. Now shut up and let's jam!'"

Nugent is keen to show his respect for not only the armed forces, but the police too on the new record, in the form of songs 'Semper Fi' and 'Screaming Eagles'.

"'Semper Fi' is of course a salute to the US Marine Corp warriors," he states proudly, "and 'Screaming Eagles' is what we call motorcycle cops, another breed of street warrior I admire very much. I have been blessed all my life to be welcomed and embraced by these special people and the songs came to me as a direct result of their influence on me."

With the pace and the energy of the record, it would be easy to imagine any one of these songs easily slipping effortlessly into the live set – but when you have a strong back catalogue, there is the age old question of what you should leave out. Ted acknowledges that it can be a nice problem to have.

"Lord have mercy! The phenomenal Detroit drummer Tommy Clufetos performed his power-groove magic on my 'Spirit Of the Wild' record back in 1995 and said it quite succinctly – he said that every one of my killer songs would make the ultimate concert opening song and the ultimate concert encore. This record fulfills that enormous qualification!"

Nugent recently performed his 6,500th show, a staggering amount by anyone's standards. However, rather than rest on his laurels or dwell on the memories of shows gone by, the Motor City Madman continues to plough onward in his own inimitable way.

"Though I am more than well aware of the joys and power of my past, I must admit that I am always intensely focused on the right here and now and future. When surrounded by world class passionate musical masters like I have been for more than fifty years, every song, every jam, every concert is a musician's dream. Add to that spectacle music loving audiences that fuel the fire with equal energy and passion and I am blessed to swan-dive into the perfect musical storm every night. I am clearly the luckiest guitar player in the world."

With such a positive outlook on his music and his lifestyle in general, there's no wonder Nugent has the drive and energy of men a third of his age.

"Quality of life, happiness and optimal fulfillment is best accomplished when surrounded by positive people with positive energy putting their hearts and souls into the absolute best, most positive things they can do," Ted explains. "'Shutup&jam!' is indeed the definitive soundtrack of the ultimate positive people, creating the most positive, driving, uppity, intense, high energy, ultra-fun, ass-kicking, soulful, R&B&R&R musical force any music lover could ever dream of. In this crazy, crazy world, we all need to Shutup&jam as often as we can!"

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It's hard to think that during the late nineties Lit was something of a phenomena in America. 'A Place In The Sun' was the band's major label debut and first single 'My Own Worst Enemy' held the number one position on the Billboard Hot Modern Rock Tracks chart for twelve weeks, crossing over into the mainstream charts where it reached number six. The track received a Billboard Music Award as the biggest Modern Rock song of 1999 and it was the summer song of America during the heat-soaked months of the same year. The album itself reached #31 on the Billboard top 200 albums. Follow up single 'Miserable' repeated the success, reaching a creditable #2 on the mainstream Rock charts.

Driven along by the Popoff brothers, Ajay on vocals and Jeremy on guitar, the band's success was relatively short-lived and second album 'Atomic' suffered from poor promotion from the record label (RCA) who were going through the inevitable internal changes. Add that to the illness and subsequent death of drummer Allen Shellenberger in the following years and the career of Lit has remained fragmented.

Mike Newdeck caught up with guitarist Jeremy Popoff and new guitarist Ryan Gillmore during the fifteen year anniversary tour of the celebrated album 'A Place In The Sun' to find out more about the album and this commemorative tour.

So why come over now for a fifteen year anniversary tour and not say for a ten year anniversary tour?

"Actually we were planning a ten year anniversary," the guitarist explains, "but of course Allen got sick and so we put it on hold. When we were over last year the interest was so great for us to come back that we had to do something. Now we're talking about coming over next year too, hopefully. We'd been asked several times if we could do some concerts and play the whole album in its entirety but we'd always said no - but now it's fifteen years, it seemed like a good thing to do; it was time. Other bands have been doing it so why not us? The fans seemed to think it'd be great too."

Shellenberger's illness and subsequent death had serious ramifications for the band.

"That wasn't great for any of us obviously," he continues. "We were in rehearsals to come out and tour over here and we had to put it on hold on the day before we were due over because something showed up on his brain and he had to have a biopsy. We had to stay home with him and the whole tour was cancelled."

'A Place In The Sun' is considered a classic by critics and fans alike and it's not difficult to hear why it's held in such high regard. But what makes it so special?

"If I knew that then I'd have written it a few more times," Popoff laughs. "It had innocence and the vitality that comes from a band that perhaps didn't know any better, plus we wrote most of the songs bar two on our own. We've always believed in doing the songwriting ourselves; we're old school. We like collaborating; when we were growing up, our manager used to hang around with Desmond Child and her office was actually in his guest house. We used to go there and hang out putting stamps on newsletters and we would be lucky enough to see Bon Jovi come over and all sorts of other artists come over and work with Desmond and we kind of grew up thinking well, you know people write with other people and that's normal. It took success to be able to write with other people and we got that more after 'A Place In The Sun', prior to that they probably wouldn't have given us the time of day."

'Miserable' is a defining song on 'A Place In The Sun', it changes the mood of the album as a whole with its melancholia and lyrically it is as clever as any song that the band, or indeed any band, has written.

Popoff explains its origins.

"I came up with the lyrics. The play on the words was down to me. We already had the verses and the melody for the songs and we'd been kicking it around rehearsals for a while. I was on the freeway coming to one of the rehearsals and I saw a sign with some words on it and I thought of those words and put them together to give the line in the chorus… .I thought it would be either really cool or really stupid. The guys put the 'yeah' chants right in there and it worked great."

You hear so many tales of record label control over songs included or track running orders these days that the late nineties seem like a very distant memory.

"Yeah, it was good," Jeremy continues. "We came up totally with the running order. When we were sat in the mastering room in New York with Ron Fair, we had all the titles written out on pieces of paper. As we listened to the songs all the way through we would move the song titles up and down the list, re-listen to it in another order and then juggle it around until we thought it sounded right. Once we were happy with the order we worked out how long the spaces should be in between songs. Some were back to back others have two breaths others longer depending on what we felt. You don't get those experiences now, it's all downloads and no one listens to twelve songs all the way through and the gaps in between that are so important to the overall flow and sound of an album. The other important thing was that back then, we still had vinyl and cassettes so we had to think which songs to put on side one and two plus what songs to start each side with. That's not relevant anymore, really it's like a lost magic."

'The View From The Bottom' has received critical acclaim from fans and critics alike for its successful attempt to recreate the signature sound of early Lit. Popoff explains how the band achieved it.

"Well really, the process is the same, we write a whole load of songs and see how they sound and feel," he offers honestly. "But this time Butch said that he thought enough time had gone by for us to revisit our big Rock anthem sound and to not really worry about dumbing stuff down to sound like some of today's bands. It was time to come back to the Mutt Lange big Rock sound. I think we went for it, particularly on the first half of the record."

How does Popoff feel that the latest album has fared compared to the glory days?

"It kind of gave us a way to continue," he explains. "All the old songs go over great live, but we didn't want to just play those, we wanted to be able to play newer songs. We wanted our fans to have new music to listen to, live and as an album. As far as popularity, it certainly didn't burn up the charts

or anything but I don't know where we fit into that format anymore, we just keep doing what we do. Yeah, it would be nice to have a radio hit, sure, but we're certainly not chasing that anymore like we were doing circa 'A Place In The Sun' because we haven't really got to and that's a great luxury."

Perhaps new guitarist Ryan Gillmor looks at it a different way?

"You can't go chasing hits or trying to write them because it doesn't really work out. You have to write what you write and if it works for you all then great and if it doesn't then it just doesn't and that's life. I wrote 'She Don't Know' and it turned out that it fitted and everyone liked it."

"That song could have been a hit," Popoff interrupts. "Had that been on an earlier album there's no doubt it would have been a hit."

So what now for Lit, another attack Stateside? More touring in Europe?

"Well as soon as we return home then we'll be figuring out our next plan for Europe, but also Asia as well because we want to go back there again next year. We're doing China before then and that's a whole new frontier for us and so we want to do more, it's exciting because it's uncharted waters for us. Also we need to think about putting out some new stuff too, we can't live off the old stuff, and people expect new music. From a personal point of view I own a successful bar and music venue back home."

Popoff owns Fullerton's 'Slide Bar' venue and last year was recently embroiled in a legal battle with an ex-bouncer who falsely implicated Popoff in the murder of a homeless man. The allegations were subsequently found to be false and the accuser appeared to be attempting to gain himself a big pay day. Clearly Popoff wants to rebuild the reputation of his prized asset.

"Well I'm going to expand it and that's happening right now," he declares excitedly. "Ryan works on the TV show 'Glee' and works on vocal production."

"Yeah that's right." Gillmor interrupts. "I help people who can't sing sound like they can with the help of Autotune."

"Kevin really loves his photography; Ajay is opening a barber shop." Popoff continues. "Everyone has stuff outside of the band that keeps them busy. We get together with the kids and family just like everyone else. At some point I'm off to Nashville to do some Country songs, it's the writing for me that's great and of course we had a few Nashville songwriters contribute to the latest album. When we do get together and play it I sing, and my voice is suited to it. Country is the way to. Recently a Country artist (Florida Georgia Line) had a hit with a Black Stone Cherry song ('Stay') and I've written material for him as well."

Here's hoping that Popoff doesn't defect completely because Lit is simply too good a band to hang up its boots. I for one look forward to new material and a speedy return to these shores in the not too distant future.

Swedish Melodic Metal band Hammerfall have been away on a self imposed hiatus for over three years. They return with their new album '(r)Evolution' and Ian Johnson talks with the bands guitarist and main songwriter Oscar Dronjak. About why they've been away for so long, the book he has written about the band and why the title of the album is taken from a 'Planet Of The Apes' movie'...

The last album 'Infected' had a much darker outlook than anything the band had done before. You have though it seems gone back to the more fan friendly sound of the early Hammerfall albums 'Glory To The Brave' and 'Legacy Of Kings'. Why have you done this, was it a conscious writing choice by you as the main songwriter, to return to an older style?

Good question Ian. To tell you the truth the way we, myself and the band, write songs is driven by how we are feeling at the time, what state of mind we're in. So 'Infected' was written and sounds just how we were feeling about things back then. When you can look back a couple of years in hindsight and remember that at that moment it wasn't the best time in my/our lives, you can understand why the album sounded like it did. Personally I had a lot of things going on, so the way I wrote the songs on 'Infected' reflects my mind-set back then. The new album is a whole different thing, when I wrote the songs for this one, I felt like I did back in the late 90s, happy, contented and that reflects in the new songs - which as you say sound much happier.

Was it easy for you to go back and write in the older style if you will, or were you still influenced by 'Infected'?

Really there was no conscious decision as to how we were going to write. The songs just came out really smoothly and I'd written 'We Won't Back Down' and another song in just a few days, so it was pretty easy at first. Though at times I did have moments where nothing would come, then there were days when I couldn't stop writing. If I'm in a good place, then I think I can write great songs, even a sad ballad can be written when you're feeling happy. Being in a good place always helps with the writing process.

I have to say that the new album grabs you by the throat as soon as you hear it and doesn't let go until it's finished playing. Is this what Hammerfall wanted for the new album, an intense hard hitting release?

Thanks so much for that, it's great to hear that other people are liking the album. Yeah, that's pretty much what we wanted to do. We felt that recently what was missing from some of our albums was the hunger, the hunger you get as a young band starting out. So we wanted to try to recapture that hunger on '(r)Evoultion' and I'm proud to say that I think we did it. We wanted to have the energy levels that you have when you first start playing together as a band back again. Song writing is what it is but if you can capture that feel, that energy, that hunger then you can always make great music.

Even though there are a lot of classic Hammerfall rockers on the new album, I have to ask about the big production ballad 'Winter Is Coming'. You always seem to have great ballads on your albums, which do you prefer writing the most, the Metal or the love songs?

We've always loved doing ballads ever since the first album and I think they make your albums more diverse when you can slow things down a bit and change pace. I personally have always loved writing ballads and not so much now but at the start of Hammerfall, they were underrated as a type of song for a Metal band to do. I was once told that it was a pussy move for a Metal band to have a ballad on their albums; but it takes a lot of energy and thought to write a song like that. A good ballad needs feelings, emotions and a different kind of energy to work with the other songs that are around it. Hopefully our ballads work. I do still like writing the Metal songs as well! (laughs)

You're once again working with producer Fredrik Nordstrom, who has helped to give the new album a big sound. Why use Frederic again?

Well, he's a good friend of ours and I've know him for many years. I recorded with him for years before Hammerfall even existed, so we've known each other a long time. Fredrik knows our sound back to front, he's a superb guy to work with, he just knows how to get the best sound out of whichever band he's working with. On '(r) Evolution' it felt smooth working with him and he especially brought out the best in the drums, which sound fantastic. The guy also handled the album mix at which he is a master, his knowledge here was amazing and he made everything flow together, which isn't easy at all. The band are, let me tell you, super happy with how everything turned out.

'Infected' came out three years ago so what have the band been doing during the off years?

We've all been working on music related projects, producing or playing on them. Two of the guys have had kids and that takes up a lot of your time. Joacim Cans (Hammerfall vocalist) had a leading part in the 'Rock Of Ages' musical here in Sweden; and I've been writing my biography, which turned in to more of a Hammerfall biography because HF has been almost 80% of my life since it started. I always wanted to tell the story of why HF exists and it took about six to eight months to write it, which was a full time job for me. So I wrote, researched and interviewed everyone that has been a part of the band. I talked with Stefan (Elmgren), our old lead guitarist about the band, which was great fun. You asked me before why the new album sounds like it does, well it's probably because of this book. Talking to people about the band and its history, made me think a lot of the early days when I was really happy about being part of this new band called Hammerfall, so this book probably influenced my song writing a lot, which you can hear in the new songs.

Is the book out now Oscar, can we get hold of it?

Not as yet, no. It has only published here in Sweden in Swedish but I told the publishers that if we didn't translate it and get it out to other countries, to coincide with the release of the new album, then we would be missing out big time. So hopefully we can get this Hammerfall biography on the shelves very soon.

I believe the new album's title is taken from one of the original 'Planet Of The Apes' films. How did this come about?

Actually what happens a lot, is that movies released in other countries around the world have the titles changed because certain words mean different things in different languages. In the US the second 'Apes' movie was called 'Beneath the Planet of the Apes'. Here in Sweden it was called '(r)Evolution' of the Apes', and revolution was written like it is on the new album's cover, which I always thought was cool, so that's how the name of the album came about.

You've always been know as a fantastic live act with a great show. So when do we get to see Hammerfall on tour again?

You know it's been almost two years since we played together and I can tell you we all miss playing in front of a live crowd of people. That's where you get your energy from and that's where your passion is fuelled, up there on stage. We do have some dates coming up; we're playing Wacken Open Air in July, which will be a special show where we will be playing the whole of the 'Glory To The Brave' album. That's because it's the 25th Anniversary of Wacken and that festival has always been great to us, so we'd wanted to do something special for them. Then we go to America and South America until Christmas then the European shows start in March 2015. There are no UK dates as yet because we don't want to do just a single London date, we want to do a week or more in the UK, which is what we're working towards.

After the band hiatus, what is next for Hammerfall, Oscar?

Well as long as the new album doesn't tank (laughs), we'll hopefully be around for a long time to come. Hammerfall is our lives and we love being in this band and as long as the fans keep listening to our music and coming to see us play, then we'll be here for many years to come. You see, Hammerfall is me living my dream, it's all I have ever wanted to do, so I can say to people keep working hard, because dreams do come true!

In March you announced you had signed with Despotz Records, what drew you to this label specifically?

K: We had heard about them for a couple of years and we heard that they were good. They offered us a great deal and seemed to be great people with their heart in the right spot. They seemed to love music and they are also based in Stockholm. It just felt good.

M: Yeah and it's great to have people around you, on the label side, that are really in it for the right reasons. We are on the same side and on the same page.

What was the rationale behind your album title?

K: Basically the title of the album came before the title of the song. We were inspired by these old VU metres, you know the ones... it's like when it peaks.

M: Pushing it to the limit (laughs). That's what we wanted to do with this album (laughs).

Sound wise, how does this album compare to your earlier work?

K: You will definitely know that it is a Crucified Barbara record that you are listening to. Of course I think it is the best album we have ever done and I am very proud of it. I think it is the heaviest album but also contains some of the most refined songs that we have written. The melodies are great and the riffs are heavy.

In the press releases you have mentioned that you are taking a stand against certain subjects that you are all very passionate about (animal rights and feminism amongst others). How do these themes fit into your music lyrically? For example, I know the latest single has a connection to some "dark statistics"?

K: For that particular song, 'To Kill A Man', the inspiration for it was that we were reading all these horrible stories about women being raped and abused in relationships and it's a very common problem all over the world. It goes on everywhere and there seems to be no ending to it. I actually read something that was really scary; for the World Cup, in the U.K., that domestic violence went up by something like thirty percent, when England were out it was even higher. It's very depressing and very frustrating to see this go on all the time, reading about it...it is very sad. You get kind of this hopeless feeling and so that anger and that feeling of hopelessness became that song.

M: 'The Ghost Inside' deals with self confidence and it's also like a frustration that made me write the lyrics for that. It's about how society, the fashion industry, put pressure on people, especially young girls, to be a certain size, fit in, have the right clothes, caring too much about how you look and behave. This song is about the voice inside you that keeps telling you that you do not fit in and trying to tell people that you should not listen to that voice. It's not the easiest thing...to silence that voice.

Have you tried anything different this time that you haven't tried before?

K: I would say what we have done different

CRUCIFIED BARBARA

Crucified Barbara are an all Female Hard Rock band from Sweden. Since forming in 1998 they have released three albums as well as building a fearsome live reputation. The Swedish quartet have just released their fourth album, 'In The Red', and Dave Scott took a trip to London to have a chat about it with vocalist Mia Coldheart and guitarist Klara Force.

this time is that we have been jamming more. We have always done that to a certain extent but even more so now. We have been in the rehearsal place everyday for almost half a year just jamming and writing songs.

M: Then we change it a hundred times and eventually we have the perfect song (laughs).

You recorded the album at the Music-A-Matic Studio with Chips Kiesby and Henryk Lipp handling the technical duties. What qualities made you return to work with those guys?

K: We were really satisfied, not only with the outcome of the last album, but also the way we worked together. We found a way to work that was really nice and they are great people to be around. They have a vision to try to keep it as analogue as possible which is great because that fits us perfectly; there are no unnecessary computer effects or stuff like that. If we were looking for a certain effect, we tried to find it within the studio, not afterwards on the computer. You can use a lot of natural verbs which I think is a great way of working. Lipp is a microphone collector; for all the guitar amps, we put like a thousand microphones on everything then chose by ear what sounded best...not by the brand of the microphone (laughs).

M: For every song you have no idea which one of the mics was used from which amp. One song could be taken from something like an old boat microphone (laughs).

K: And no one knows in the end, not even him, because he just chose by what he heard and not what he saw which I think is a cool way to do it.

M: As with the choice of label, we chose Kiesby as a producer because he also doesn't want to change us in any way. He just sees the band as we are.

You have recorded a video for '...Man'; how did you translate these important standpoints into a visual representation?

K: It was actually Mia's brilliant idea.

M: We wanted to make a video to show this but it had to be right because it is a very fragile and delicate subject, so it was important. So we had to find all the things to put in it but I was like "we have to use this" and "it has to be like that"...there was a lot of research and thought into it.

I think the newspaper images that you slotted in are very powerful.

K: Because we didn't want to exploit and glorify rape victims with visuals of real women so we thought it was better to do it with newspaper clips instead of making entertainment out of a horrible thing.

M: We let the facts speak for themselves.

You have already announced a European tour for the autumn which sees you all returning to the U.K. When was the last time you were here on tour? I know you have done some festivals but it seems that you haven't done multiple dates for a few years.

K: I know, there have been way too few shows in the U.K. We have been touring a lot but unfortunately we haven't been here for a while.

M: It's been a long time. We did the Motorhead tour which was one month but that was in 2006 I think. We also did that tour with Backyard Babies in 2008.

I believe you meet Brian May on one of those tours?

K: Yes, that was a nice evening when Phil Campbell (Motorhead) joined us; he said "when we play London my good friend May is coming to say hello". I asked if he could introduce me to him and he said sure; I was really looking forward to it. When it finally happened, he came knocking on our dressing room and I got so nervous I couldn't even speak. I couldn't even speak English...I was like "Hello I am Klara" [in a strange accent]...I sounded like the village idiot. Then I didn't say anything...nothing...I should have said "I love your music" or "I am such a fan, you are great" but I couldn't think of anything to say. All I managed was "Hello I am Klara" in very bad English (laughs).

M: You did get a nice picture though (laughs).

K: I think that was the only time I ever got star-struck.

What can your fans expect on this latest tour?

M: We want to play a lot of new songs, as much as possible from '...Red', because we really like it. We have been playing it so much in the rehearsal room now we really want to get out there.

You have donated merchandise to Rock Against Cancer, your latest single appears on a compilation CD for Feminist Initiative and your music has even appeared in support of the board game 'Z Or Alive'. Is it important to you all to contribute to these causes?

K: For me personally it gets more important every year. The older I get, the more I feel I should really do something with the voice that I have. There is so much going on, horrible stuff, going on in the world and I feel it is really important to take a stand. It doesn't have to be big, it doesn't have to be a very clear subject with the band but just to be able to always take the discussion places; just going to the pub... wherever...and take the discussions about things like racism for example. When there is bad stuff going on I think it is very important to speak your mind and keep on doing that, even on a personal level. If I go to the pub round the corner, where nobody knows I play in a band, and people say stupid, racist stuff...it is very important to take a stand on every level.

Finally, for those who are unaware, where does the memorable name Crucified Barbara come from?

K: Well, in Sweden, you know those blow up sex dolls with all the holes etc (laughs)...the Swedish name for them is a "Barbara". We went to a festival one year and we saw someone had put one of these dolls on a cross and it looked hilarious. So we thought we would write a song called Crucified Barbara and it ended up being the band's name.

Threshold one of the UK's finest Prog Metal acts are back with their wonderful new 10th studio album entitled 'For The Future'. Ian Johnson talks with the band's keyboard player and producer Richard West, about the new album, what being a Prog band means, middle age grumpiness and more besides.

Threshold always seem to get pigeonholed as a Prog band but you have always seemed to me to be more interested in how the songs sound, rather than their length or what genre they purport to be. Do you agree?

Yeah! I'd have to agree with you on that. Of course on the new album we do have the song called 'The Box' which is about twelve minutes long but that's about as Proggy as we get, I suppose. And even within that track there are lot of song structures that make it different from your usual Prog song. So we do I suppose get lumped into that genre, which we don't mind really. Sometimes though it can be a drawback because a few years ago you couldn't get yourself arrested if you were in a Prog band, it just wasn't trendy to like Prog or be in a Prog band. Today though it seems to be the in thing and Prog's cool once again. Hopefully though our music has stayed the course because of our love of, as you said, the song and we'll just keep going as long as people like our music.

I recently read that you said that you're always trying to record the ultimate Threshold album. Have you on 'For The Journey' done that, or are you still striving for that goal?

I think we have, I really do. 'For The Journey' is close to the ultimate album we wanted to make but I would also think we were pretty close with 'Dead Reckoning' as well. I think personally that we get better with each album we make and I'm so pleased with 'For…', as are the rest of the guys. For me it's like when Pink Floyd got the sound they'd been looking for on 'Dark Side Of The Moon', when everything clicked into place for them, it's the same for us on 'For…', everything just clicked when we were writing it and performing it, so it just worked. We found that everything fell into place and we hope that you guys and the fans like it because we're really happy with it.

The album's lyrics deal with everything from politics to religion to environmental issues. Are you unhappy with modern life or is it grumpy middle age rearing its head in the lyrics?

(Laughs) So you get grumpiness from the words! (Laughs again). No, we're not grumpy at all. Actually I think this time our lyrics, although they do address some of the issues of the day, have a much more positive outlook on modern life. I'm in a good place in my life so the lyrics instead of pointing at the world and saying that, that or this is rubbish are more introspective and instead they are saying what can I/ we do to help out. I tried to write about honesty, repentance, forgiveness, more internal points of view if you will, though I do agree we touch on religion and politics on 'The Box' and 'The Mystery Show' but only in the gentlest of ways. The soapbox we might have been on ranting and raving about things a few years ago, has been put away for the time being. It's fascinating though how people interpret your lyrics.

The music is more certainly more upbeat and positive, less dark if you will, than I've heard from Threshold in quite a while, why is this?

I think it's because 'March Of Progress', our last album, was about the rise and fall of a civilization and the death of an Empire, which isn't a happy subject. The new album is more about finding those positive things within yourself and life in general and finding that light at the end of the tunnel at the end of your 'Journey' so to speak. Which I think has given 'For…' a more as you said positive outlook musically.

Has it been easier to write the lyrics and melodies now that Damian (Wilson, Threshold vocalist) has been back with the band for a few years, now that you have him in mind rather than Mac (R.I.P.)?

Actually Ian, it took a while to get things right. I'd been writing with Mac in mind for quite a few albums, so changing to Damian didn't really cause a problem. Still I'd got used to writing in a certain way, so you have to feel your way into changing the way you write lyrics and melodies. You have to re-educate yourself on how a person sings, what a person's range and vocal capabilities are and luckily I'd worked with Damian on a few projects before he rejoined us, so I knew already that he'd changed a bit vocally over the years. It was really a process of re-learning and teaching myself how to write with him and Threshold in mind. Your always learning, which is always a good thing, even on this album there are probably a couple of things I'd do differently. I'll have to save those

for the next album though (laughs), so writing for Threshold is always an ongoing process. I think what helped us the most on this album was that we were the same six guys who played on 'March…' and that we'd done a ton of live shows together. We know how we all think, which made us tighter as a band. And this led to the songs being much stronger because we all knew what we wanted to get from the new album.

It used to take an age for Threshold to make albums now two have come out in quick succession, was this Nuclear Blast (the band's record label) giving you a kick up the backside?

No, (laughs) we gave ourselves a kick up the backside. NB have been great to us and even though there was almost a five year gap between 'Dead…' and 'March…' they were always supportive of us. Even when at first because of the fact that Mac had left and we were looking for a replacement and then when he sadly passed away, NB never pressured us to make a new album. To tell you the truth, we'd always planned as a band to make an album every couple of years and hopefully now, that is what we'll do. Two years is a perfect length of time because it lets you promote, tour and get everything you want to out of your new album and also gives you time to start work on the next one. So hopefully we'll be back with a new album in a couple of years.

Your albums chart highly in places like Germany, France, Sweden... Why do you think that apart from those in the know, Threshold are not more well know or bigger in the UK?

That's a good question. The weird thing is that we've now got into the mindset of, if we say we'll play a local show then we will go to Holland or Germany to play it, instead of England, which is a strange thing for a band from Surrey to do. We have always had really good shows in London and then had great times playing around the UK but we've never really ventured past the odd live date here and there. We've always wanted to do a full tour of Great Britain but NB know their markets and we do much better in Europe than we do here for whatever reason. Hopefully now that NB have a UK office, things will change and we'll get to tour more in Britain, which we all want to do. So to answer your question, probably the touring in Europe has held us back here.

You're all very much in demand as musicians, producers and writers so does coming back to Threshold every couple of years feel like coming home?

You know it does. It's a place we all come back to and it's immediately comfortable and feels right to us. When you go to other projects there is always an element of risk but with Threshold we know what we want to achieve and how each of us works, so when we're back together it does feel a lot like family. These guys are like my brothers, and I love the time we get to spend together as Threshold.

Last time we spoke I asked you about a new fan club album (Threshold have released many excellent fan club albums over the years) and you mentioned you were working on one, any news on that Richard?

Hopefully we'll get to it soon. It really is top of our list of things to do. As you might know Damian's solo work has a lot of acoustic stuff on it and using his voice on a second 'Wireless' album (acoustic versions and rearrangements of Threshold songs) would I think sound wonderful. Personally I love taking some of our colder, darker songs and changing a chord or arrangement here and there, which gives them a completely different sound and revitalizes them. I can't say when it will be done but sometime soon is all I can tell you.

What's next then for Threshold?

Well at the moment we're doing the promotion for 'For…' which comes out in September and there are three versions of the album; the normal CD plus a Digi-pack and vinyl version both of which come with bonus tracks. The vinyl looks especially good because the artwork in the gatefold form looks amazing. Then it's touring, hopefully as I said before with some UK dates, then just working hard over the next year or so pushing the band and 'For The Journey' as far as it will go. If we can keep the momentum going we'll start work on a new album with another two years worth of experience under our belts. Of course we'll all probably be working on a few outside things as well but Threshold is where our minds and hearts are right now and we hope everyone will be as excited by the new album as we all are.

NIVA

Wolf Gant talks to Tony Niva as the band that carries his name as moniker, releases its second album in as many years…..

The last time I spoke to Swedish singer Tony Niva, the ex- Swedish Erotica and Lion's Share front man was positively bubbling over the then new album 'Magnitude', an extremely positive and uplifting collection of AOR songs that painted a picture of a band very much at home with its music. However that was only last September and yet a new album, entitled 'Incremental IV', is due for release at the beginning of this September. Once again, the singer is back enthusing about another great collection of strong, determined songs that illustrate perfectly the effect of 'Magnitude' and its success on the writing trio of Niva, Ljunggren and Persson, and the willingness of the band, now with a stable line-up, to once again "hit the boards…."

Tony, it seems only a few months since we spoke, but you already have a new album ready to be released. I presume 'Magnitude' and the resulting interest in Niva which followed, really got the creative juices flowing?

Absolutely, I think it has a great deal to do with that. Even though we have an ongoing writing process in this band, the opportunities we'd had with the last record really did fire us up to accomplish great new songs for this one.

Last time we spoke you talked about 'Magnitude' as an album that painted pictures. Was this the intention this time as well?

Not so much… I don't think there was any other intention than simply to write songs that, even more than ever, show the great harmonies that we created during the writing process. Through those ideas, hopefully the listener will be filled with different emotions using those melodies and the lyrics they inspired.

I guess that extends to the artwork too, right?

Yes, it's a really nice piece of art isn't it? Mattias Norén really did a great job. I was explaining my inner picture of something with depth, mathematics and sunlight shining through the logo. He really nailed it.

The title is very interesting. 'Incremental IV'…. Is there a story behind it? "Incremental", in the dictionary, of course means a steady progression upwards in stages - is that what you were referring to?

Absolutely… The title came about really because of two factors. I realised from the off that this album actually is our fourth, so I wanted to associate that to the title; then, as you say, the word 'incremental' means a step wise enumeration and that is hopefully what we will continue to do in the future. The intention was simply to inform the listener that this is the fourth album and counting…

We really love the second song 'Crush'… It might be a more suitable title for a heavier band, but it fits because once again the album doesn't pull any punches on production does it?

Well, we're still talking about music in the vein of AOR, that's our style, but I do like to think that this production is still pretty heavy when it's required and works well considering the genre we're dealing with here.

You and Marcus Persson basically produced the album yourself this time; even after the success of Thomas Plec Johansson's job on 'Magnitude', did you feel this was the best way forward?

I would really like to give credit to Marcus for what he has done with this production. He really achieved a lot more than I ever imagined possible. My vision from the start was to go for the purer AOR sound, in a real Niva type of way, with the different elements we've just spoken about, and now, with the final result in hand, that is exactly what we have achieved I believe.

Did you tour for 'Magnitude' at all? What songs from this one are you really looking forward to playing now?

No, sadly we've not toured 'Magnitude' and unfortunately not even had one live gig yet. There are great songs with live potential from all the albums; 'Gold From The Future', 'Magnitude' and now 'Incremental IV', but I don't want to pick out any particular one right now since there are so many great songs with both up-tempo and mid-tempo moments as well as great ballads to choose from."

Roger Ljunggren is once again a key member of the band and a key ingredient of the album!

Yes, he is a really great song writer, a great guitarist and also a good friend. He is really bending the strings in a way, which now I think has become a key trademark of Niva's sound. Sometimes his solos are fast and furious and in the next moment executed with feeling and full of emotion. It just brings so much to the albums.

Where do you think this album will see you go now? The interest in your work from the AOR and Melodic Rock community obviously justified another record quickly, but how much can you realistically achieve?

I think there's so much more that can be achieved; a lot more than just releasing records anyway. And I'm not only talking about the composing field when I say that. It would've been a dream come true to enter the classic concert venues, and step on stage at some of the famous festivals but let's see what the future holds now.

Last time we spoke you mentioned "finding that more modern approach, whilst still keeping the heart of the music". Have you found that niche now in your opinion?

Yes, as it is right now, after these three albums, it does feel like we've found that certain way of just doing the right things during the studio sessions and that this has become a significant path for Niva. Regardless of that though, we still are who we are and we'll be doing our work in the Niva type of way from now on, no matter what!

'Incremental IV' is released through AOR Heaven on September 1st 2014.

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MISS BEHAVIOUR

Swedish melodic rock sensations Miss Behaviour are, this year, celebrating 10 years in the business. Following the release of 2011's incredible 'Last Woman Standing' the band are just about to release their third and equally fantastic album 'Double Agent'. Mark Donnelly put the questions to founding-member and guitarist Erik Heikne about the release of the new album.

Following the sensational reaction to your last album, 'Last Woman Standing', did you feel a real pressure in the recording of the new album?

'Last Woman Standing' was a huge project for us. We worked on that album for years and did everything our own way, because we were sure it would be a great album. We fired two singers, a bass player and drummer during the process. In that way the new album was much easier to record. We toured a lot on 'Last Woman Standing' and became a very solid group and we've been through some really hard times, with the passing of Michael Sundén and a lot of other business related things. All this made the writing and recording of 'Double Agent' almost a relief for us. At the end of the day, making music is our core business and what we love to do the most. Being under pressure is good for creativity and performance, I think. It's much easier and more inspiring to record an album when you know there are people out there longing for it and having expectations.

I personally think that you have surpassed the last album with 'Double Agent'. What are your favourite songs from the new album? My personal favourites are the epic 'The Cause of Liberty', 'Edge Of The World' and 'Dancing With Danger'.

Thanks a lot, and I agree with you; we are a much better band today. We have a really tight rhythm section (Magnum Jacobs – drums and Nicky Bloom – bass) on board and everyone knows what's expected from them, which makes it very easy and fun to write new music and record albums. A big difference is also that we now are three people participating in the song writing (Erik, Henrik Sproge and Sebastian Roos). The song 'Corporation Arms' is a favourite. It's written in honour of Michael basically. The Corporation Arms is actually a pub in Grimsby, which was one of Michael's favourites. We had great times together at that place. I also like the songs you mentioned and I think 'Cold Response' is a great tune too.

The Miss Behaviour sound perfectly blends 80s AOR/Melodic Rock with a modern sound. Who are your favourite bands from past and present that have influenced you?

That is spot on and exactly what Henrik (Sproge, keyboard player and co-founding member) and I had in mind when we first started this band, almost ten years ago. We are huge fans of Foreigner, Magnum, Toto and such. The melody is always the number one priority for us, so I guess any band with great melodic orientation, modern or past, count as influences.

It is now over a year since the tragic accident of your manager Michael Sundén. How did the latter affect the band at the time and what will you remember most about Michael?

It affected us big time. Business wise of course, but first and foremost we lost a great friend and the man who believed in us and made great things happen. Michael was a one of a kind; taking no for an answer did not exist in his way of working and living. I have so many great memories and I will always be forever thankful to him. In a way he is still with us, cause we try to let his everlasting positive spirit and mentality live on in the way we work and approach things today.

Why do you think Sweden produces so many fantastic AOR/Melodic Rock bands such as yourselves, H.e.a.t, Work Of Art, Eclipse, Treat, Houston and SunStrike to name but a few?

I have no good answer to that question really. People keep asking us this a lot and there is no good answer. We sure have a history of great Melodic Rock bands and that may affect the situation. But the scene in Sweden is really anonymous, unfortunately.

The 'Smokehead Rocks Tour' from 2011, featuring Electric Boys, Miss Behaviour, Dynazty, Tainted Nation & Sencelled was a huge success. Would you like to be part of such a tour again in the future?

Sure; it may seem that we were all really different bands but it worked out fine. We all had great respect for each other's music, so there were never any rivalries on the tour bus. This concept was Michael's idea and I think it turned our really great, just as the tour we did before that, with Houston and Crashdïet had done. We have a great fan base in the UK now and the way the fans in the UK get involved and support us is just incredible. So much love for the music. You can't compare it to the live scene in Sweden really.

You have played live in the UK several times as you say. Have you any plans to tour to promote the new album and do they include the UK?

Nothing is settled yet but let's just say we're working on it. We have to come back to the UK for sure; we just love the people and the scene over there. We're crossing fingers that our fans like the new album and want us to come back playing….

Miss Behaviour release their new album 'Double Agent' on August 29th on AOR Heaven. Check out the review in this issue.

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MIKE TRAMP

Interview by Mónica Castedo-López

Mainly known for being the lead singer in White Lion, Mike Tramp returns with his new solo album, 'Museum', out on 18 August on Target Records. As its predecessor, the album is semi-acoustic and comes straight from Tramp's heart. Conversing via phone London-Copenhagen at the end of July, Tramp started this interview by admitting he is not in a good place, clarifying he now makes his own music as a solo artist and what his music means to him.

My songs are an extension of myself. It's something that happens as I sit down to play my guitar because I feel I want to play it. I never sit down to write songs as something that I need to get done because I need to record an album. The songs just come naturally when they're there, and they don't take a long time, they just want to get out. Then you feel you are writing good music and you want to share it with people and then you realise also: "Oh, by the way, it's also how I'm surviving". So all these different things put together, it is who I am, it is what I do, it's just the way it is.

Was 'Museum', which I love, written when you were going through difficulties or was it a happier moment?

No, a lot of 'Museum' is not really current, but a result of something that has been happening for a long time, and all of it couldn't be on 'Cobblestone Street', but it's all part of the same thing. You know, regardless if the album 'Museum' has a natural progression from 'Cobblestone Street', I'm still the same person and I'm still dealing with the same issues, and they are far from resolved. This is season two of a TV show that could be going for six or seven seasons [laughs].

Well, I hope it has a happy ending.

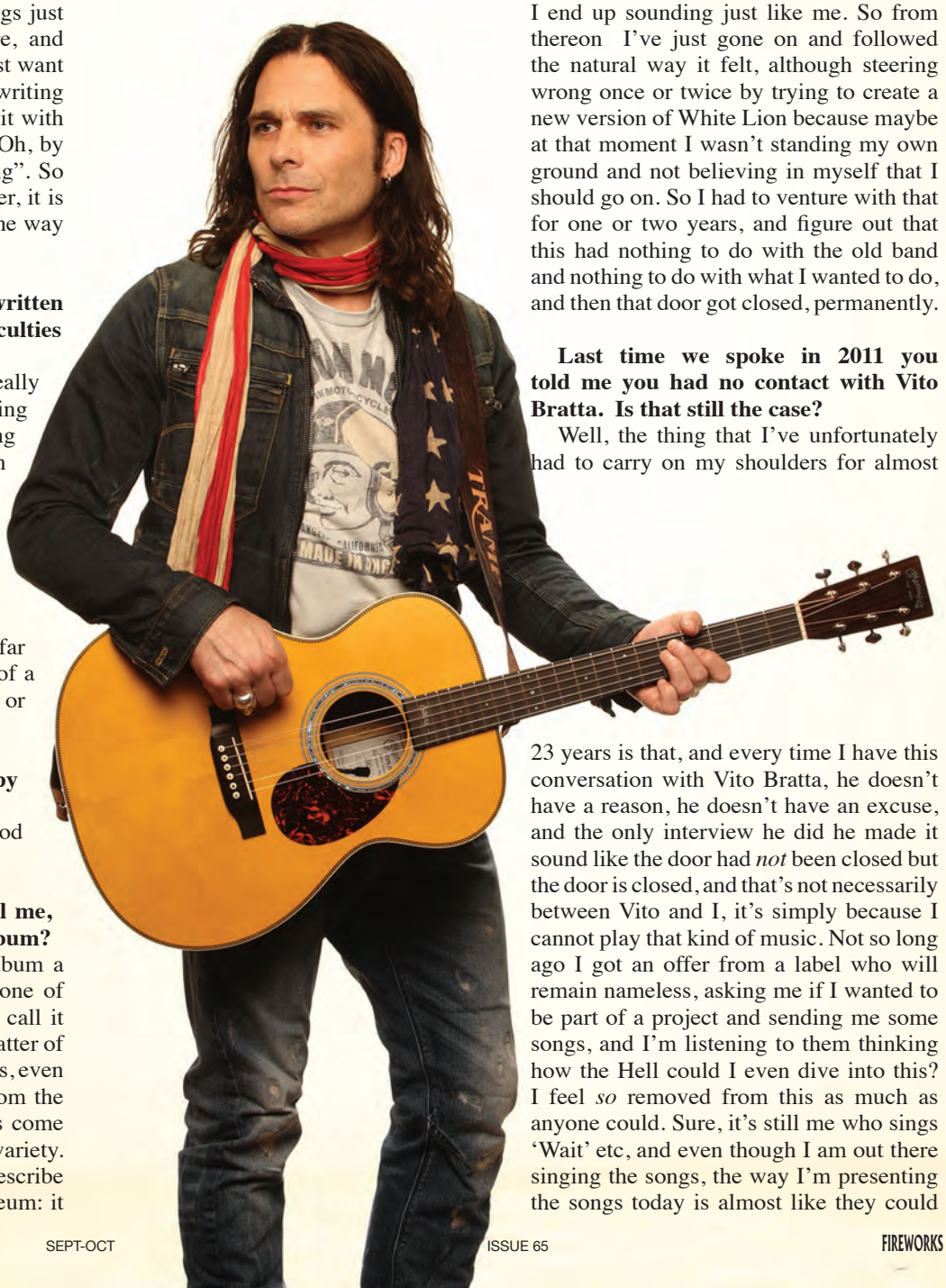
So do I. There are some good moments.

I'm happy to hear that. So tell me, how would you summarise the album?

Obviously when you give an album a title, you leave yourself open for one of the questions being "Why did you call it that?" And for me, it was really a matter of I wanted to explore a variety of songs, even though some of the songs come from the same foundation, and all the songs come from me, I wanted to have a bigger variety. The only way I thought I could describe it for myself was it was like a museum: it covers a large amount of the same things, just maybe viewed from different angles. Like, if it's a museum of natural history it goes all the way from the caveman to modern day evolution and to me, it is really just that from my musical upbringing and the albums that I loved and the time period – late 60s to all the way through the 70s. I just grew up with so many albums that had this variety, especially if you take a band like Queen, there's no doubt it's Queen on every single song, but they went much further than I ever will between separate songs. When I was just a fan, maybe I didn't realise what it was, but later on after I'd done a lot of Rock albums that had a similarity in each song, something inside me just said: "This ain't enough, I can't lock myself into a box."

So you have no intention of going back to the sound you had with White Lion?

No, no… it's kind of like telling myself I'm going to start playing soccer again and then realise *no you're not*. My legs are just not going to handle that. I really have tried to describe it in as good and clever way as I can because so many fans around the world that don't bother reading what I say, keep asking the same question. They truly believe, because there are some bands doing the same thing, even though they are not doing the same thing, or sounding the same, but they've been doing it for 45 years, and there's a few bands that almost sound the same, and stuff like that. Coming out of White Lion and going into Freak of Nature I had already felt a change, both a physical change in my soul and in my voice that something was calling me to change. So as my voice was changing and getting deeper, I just didn't feel like singing up in the stratosphere. So creating Freak Of Nature gave me a new canvas to paint on. I did three albums with that, and toured with them. Then after that, I knew after being in three bands I could not give my heart and soul again, I had to just be me. And then I end up sounding just like me. So from thereon I've just gone on and followed the natural way it felt, although steering wrong once or twice by trying to create a new version of White Lion because maybe at that moment I wasn't standing my own ground and not believing in myself that I should go on. So I had to venture with that for one or two years, and figure out that this had nothing to do with the old band and nothing to do with what I wanted to do, and then that door got closed, permanently.



Last time we spoke in 2011 you told me you had no contact with Vito Bratta. Is that still the case?

Well, the thing that I've unfortunately had to carry on my shoulders for almost 23 years is that, and every time I have this conversation with Vito Bratta, he doesn't have a reason, he doesn't have an excuse, and the only interview he did he made it sound like the door had *not* been closed but the door is closed, and that's not necessarily between Vito and I, it's simply because I cannot play that kind of music. Not so long ago I got an offer from a label who will remain nameless, asking me if I wanted to be part of a project and sending me some songs, and I'm listening to them thinking how the Hell could I even dive into this? I feel *so* removed from this as much as anyone could. Sure, it's still me who sings 'Wait' etc, and even though I am out there singing the songs, the way I'm presenting the songs today is almost like they could

have come off 'Cobblestone Street' or 'Museum'. That just goes back to the fact the song-writing hasn't changed. The hair may have changed but the foundation of the song-writing comes from that late 60s/ early 70s time when I was introduced to music in Copenhagen.

This new solo album is an actual solo album, and not with the Rock 'N' Roll Circuz Band?

No, it's not. The last two solo albums have been pure solo albums. The reason why 'Stand Your Ground' and the first Rock 'N' Roll Circuz album, they started out as Mike Tramp solo album…well the first one was, but as I brought in a new band, some of who were friends of mine, they were very strong musicians and we started arranging my songs, and there was just too much of a band feel in the way we played that I couldn't just call it a Mike Tramp solo album. There's too many guitar solos, too many big intros, so those two albums became the Rock N Roll Circuz where I was able to go a little bit deeper into the guitar riff orientated songs, and especially the second album, I wrote with that in mind. But I also found out, and realised, that as much as I loved this, I just knew that there was no way, given the fact of the business and how the world is, that I could break this band world-wide, or even tour and make a living out of it, or the other guys to make a living. So we ended up only doing one European tour, which was fun but it wasn't realistic. It's too late when I'm already fifty years old and the

"...after I'd done a lot of Rock albums that had a similarity in each song, something inside me just said: 'This ain't enough, I can't lock myself into a box.'"

Mike Tramp

other guys are in their early forties…they don't have that time to give anymore. So then, after I had recorded 'Cobblestone Street' I asked myself: "Okay, what would happen if myself, who only has to answer to myself, goes out and presents my music?" and after I reached out to a few agents in Europe, before I knew it I had forty shows booked, I jumped in a car and drove around. Show by show I started locking into it and finding the rhythm, and ever since that time I've now passed 300 shows around the world. It's just worked so well. I would *like* to take it to a higher level with the sound of 'Museum' but it will never be a big band. I feel that this is where I stand and feel that I'm offering something fresh and new but it's all built on the past.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Yes, I do, and usually I don't when people ask me that question. What I have to say is that as a musician we evolve and I have followed my natural evolution where the music wanted to go, so please listen to this album as Mike Tramp who he is, not as Mike Tramp who once sang 'Wait' or 'When The Children Cry', regardless of what happens on my show. You have to review the new album based upon what you hear now.

Mike Tramp starts a 15 show UK tour beginning August 28th through to September 14th. Check out the details on his website www.miketramp.dk

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Music has always been an integral part of the movie business, originally it was the only sound as a piano-player or organist played along live to the pictures to provide atmosphere, tension or pathos to a scene. More recently the soundtrack and subsequent album has become a mutual marketing tool for film-maker and musician alike. Many a career has been started or resurrected due to a song on a soundtrack or TV show. Fortunately for those of us in the Rock scene a new film, 'Scintilla', has given birth to an exciting musical offshoot. Our man on the ground, Gary Marshall, was the first to get the lowdown.

While attending 1998 Gods Festival in Wigan, a chance encounter brought me into contact with members of the band Balance of Power (BOP) who were in the throes of releasing their excellent 'Book of Secrets' album. This chance meeting led to an enduring friendship, with a subsequent elevation to status of confidante. However, as Spinal Tap had an issue with exploding drummers, BOP found it difficult, for various reasons, to keep hold of a singer. Eventually, this and the ever present challenge of making a life in music pay saw the band fade from the scene in 2005.

Despite talk of a new album nothing materialised, that is until early 2014 when Lionel Hicks (Producer/Drummer) suggested we meet up for a beer. At that time I was sworn to absolute secrecy as the details were not set in stone; however the wonderful news he imparted was that there was new material in the offing. Was it BOP? That was apparently still open to debate, as was the vocalist, but negotiations were well advanced with the one and only Biff Byford the man synonymous with Saxon. So how had this potential collaboration come about?

After BOP Hicks had developed and expanded his role of providing music and audio production for films into that of a Film Producer and it was in this guise that the seeds of The Scintilla Project came about. Hicks takes up the story.

"I'd done some work with Toby Jepson (Little Angels) who had been producing Saxon; through him I was introduced to Biff. Over a period of time a discussion started up about the possibility of having a Saxon track over the credits on a Sci-Fi movie ('Scintilla') I was producing. This established a relationship with Biff and as we talked, the thought emerged that maybe we should do a concept album based on the film and Biff was up for that. In fact, he was the most enthusiastic of anyone and that became infectious. He provided the momentum and it snowballed from there."

It transpires that the music already existed as Hicks confirms.

"Tony (Ritchie) was still writing songs in hope that Balance of Power would do another album, so there was a lot of great material he'd created. I got him an early version of the movie so he could immerse himself in the story and he re-wrote the lyrics to the songs to fit with the concept." Without a doubt Ritchie has lost none of the chops that made the BOP songs so memorable.

Hicks' is candid about his motivation for getting back into the water.

"Unfinished business," he says without hesitation. "I always felt there was more to come but the years just kept drifting by and there were always the precarious financial aspects. I got very seriously ill, dangerously ill in fact. Fortunately I came through that but during my recovery my dad (also a drummer) became ill and died. I just knew then that I couldn't let my music career finish as it had. I'm not sure ironic is the right word but it was perhaps ironic that I'd taken a break from sitting by my dad's bedside by visiting Biff, who lived not far from the hospital, to talk about the album when dad finally passed, it seemed to be a sign."

A key part of Hicks' recovery was getting back behind the drum kit for the first time in many years.

"I had to work hard because I'd not drummed in a long time and I needed to get the fitness back, but also because I wanted this to be my best drumming ever. I think I succeeded in that." It's not hard to agree when one hears the music, his runs and fills are superb. I was however surprised to learn that BOP guitarist Pete Southern wasn't involved, not least because it sounds like his playing a lot of the time.

"He was asked, several times," asserts Hicks "but the timing just didn't work for him. We were all set to fly to my studio in Minneapolis when Pete said he couldn't get time off from his teaching job. Consequently we ended up using a couple of local guys (Stoney Wagner and Chris Masimore) plus producer Andy Sneap (ex-Sabbat). We brought in Gizz Butt (Cradle of Filth) to do the solos."

The keyboards were supplied by an interesting source.

"You'll remember former BOP vocalist John K," continues Hicks. "He came in to play the keys and he's done a great job too."

So, is The Scintilla Project a one-off or can we expect more?

"There seems to be a will to do more whether it's under this name or another' asserts Hicks. 'Biff is up for it and we hope this is just the beginning of something that will have legs. Ideally we'd like to play the album live and Biff is using his connections to see if we can get the support slot with a major band so we can do some big venues, which would allow us to do the album justice."

Speaking of Byford, I opine that the Biff on this album shows more versatility than ever before.

"I think that was part of the attraction for him when he heard the songs' agrees Hicks. 'They provided him with a challenge and an opportunity to show he can sing in a lot of different styles."

The promotional video for the movie on YouTube intersperses footage with that of the band playing one of the album's tracks ('Beware The Children') and the movie looks like a Sci-Fi fans dream.

"That's what we're hoping' says Hicks with a laugh. 'It's something I'm very proud of. It's based in Russia but filmed in Halifax and we've got some well know actors involved - Beth Winslet, John Lynch ('Sliding Doors') and Antonia Thomas ('Misfits')." Narration from the movie is used between tracks on the album to great effect all adding to the atmosphere."

The film has its Premiere and the album its launch on the 12th August. Hopefully a live outing will follow; on all counts, I for one can't wait.

THE DOWLING POOLE

As a leading figure in bands such as The Grip, Honeycrack and Jackdaw4, as well as contributing music for numerous television shows, Willie Dowling has enjoyed a long career in music. The multi-talented artist recently teamed up with the equally versatile Jon Poole to create The Dowling Poole, a collaboration funded via the Pledge Music route. James Gaden talked to Willie to learn more...

I believe you met your writing partner Jon Poole while you were both working on Ginger Wildheart's '555%' album?

I believed it was and that's what I've been saying, but Jon, who I assume was slightly offended, although he'd never say anything to me, pointed out that we had played together in 2005 at one of Ginger's shows, which I'd completely forgotten about! (laughs) Technically that was the first time we'd met, but apart from rehearsing with him for a couple of hours, we didn't really speak much more than saying hello. I knew Jon could play, but it wasn't until I was actually in a studio with him that I saw how good he was. He has a complete change of personality – he's just a fireball of energy, jokes… it can be overwhelming at times, so on the road I was kind of cautious because he was just an animal. (laughs) Yet in the studio, this completely different personality takes over and unlike so many musicians who get in a studio and waste time, this guy is on it, he's just so professional! He wanders from instrument to instrument, I had no idea he was so versatile – he's extraordinary. That really was where the seed was planted, because I don't come across talent like that very often.

With you both being versatile, did you have any idea what kind of record or genre you would aim for, or did you just see what happened?

I was thinking we should see what happened naturally – I'd just come out of Jackdaw4 which was a bit like a messy divorce. There was very little shouting or screaming, but it was difficult to say goodbye to that unit after ten years. I knew I needed to do something else, and working with Jon seemed a good place to start. I didn't really know what it was going to be – he, on the other hand, did. That was apparent when he brought the first batch of songs, aiming for something summery, psychedelic, British Pop, happy, upbeat stuff. When I heard the bits and pieces of songs I thought 'Fucking hell!' and knew exactly what he was aiming at. It was a unique experience for me because I'm usually the instigator in every band I've been in. I've looked for a kind of Lennon/McCartney relationship but I'm usually the one pulling the strings. With Jon, I was having to up my game to write stuff that could stand up to what he was doing.

How long was it before you knew you had an album taking shape?

I think it would be about three and a half months but it wasn't possible to do it in one block. The idea was I'd do a lot in Jon's absence, but it was the collaboration itself that really excited me. I mixed it alone but the advantage of the digital age is I can send a mix to him, he can listen and then we talk on the phone or on Skype about how it sounds, so even then there is a degree of collaboration.

There's just the two of you on the record, aside from a guest vocal appearance from Givvi Flynn on the last track. Did you take into consideration how it would be replicated live?

It was only really once we were six months into the album we even discussed what we were going to call it, we were simply interested in seeing how the music came out. We're doing some Pledge gigs performing acoustically, but we have been thinking it would be great to do it with a full band. We'd need a drummer, a bass player… Jon's a phenomenal bass player but I'd rather have him on guitar and singing. Then we'd want keyboards… but it all costs money! That's where Pledge can really pay off and Ginger is the perfect model for that. He has sufficient number of supporters, and we're only talking about 5,000 people or so, so it's not a massive number, but when you deal with those people directly it's sufficient to fund his project. His costs are higher than mine because he doesn't have his own studio like I do, so I looked at his figures and I rationalised that if I could get sales for the Dowling Poole up to 2,500, essentially we could run a band, Jon and I could get a wage and we could pay musicians for a tour. That's our goal and it's not far away. We've got about 800 Pledgers so far, so it doesn't seem a long way off, but the market has dropped out completely in terms of record sales. My old band, The Grip, did far more than most bands are selling these days, and we were nothing! (laughs) It's very odd.

Are there are songs that were left scattered by the wayside?

I think we started with thirteen. I put the CD on to listen to it as objectively as I could, to force myself to think how I could improve it. The answer was instantaneous, and that was drop two of the songs. Both of them I think are pretty good songs, we ended up giving them out as free samples so to speak, to draw people in. One was called 'The Straw Man' and was all about Jimmy Savile and the BBC, the other was called 'White Light'. Those two, as good as they were, turned too many corners. It was a criticism often levelled at Jackdaw4, that it was too diverse. I always thought that was its strength. The identity of a band comes from the strength of its song writing – why that has to be limited to a certain style I do not know. I always cite The Beatles as a prime example, from album to album there was so much diversity. Now, if you're a Metal band, you make a Metal album, that's that. Anyway, I digress – those two songs did not compliment the rest of the body of work, which had a real continuity to it. It was quite cathartic as well, because as it happened, those two songs were both mine! (laughs)

I enjoyed a 60 minute chat with Willie, of which this is only a small fraction. You can read the entire interview at www.rocktopia.co.uk, where Willie also talks about the pros and cons of Pledge Music, working for television and a fascinating look behind the scenes of the music world.

EXTREME

INTERVIEW BY SUE ASHCROFT

In the years I've been interviewing Rock stars, Gary Cherone was one who I had wanted to speak to more than most, not just because I'm such a fan, but I needed corroboration for the fact that I was, in a very small way, instrumental in the story of Extreme getting back together. So, on the day the band were to play in Manchester on their sold out Pornograffitti Live tour, I finally got the chance to ask Gary the all important questions and also to chat about what the future holds for one of the best loved bands of the '80s.

I interviewed Nuno before the last tour and he told me a little bit about how you got the band back together after such a long time. Can you tell me a little bit from your perspective please?

Well, everything he said is false! (laughs) It depends on how far you wanna go back, I mean, I've been wanting to get the band back together since the early 2000's, and you know, between me and Nuno doing different projects, the timing was never right. But we both knew that someday it was gonna happen. I was hoping it would happen around 2005 and I think he was working with Perry Farrell at that time. He was doing a project, or he was finishing up a Drama Gods record. And, long story short you know, we did reunions on the East Coast and Boston, we went to the Azores and there was a radio station that had a 20th anniversary, I think in Boston. So, we did that and we did the Brad Delp benefit, so it was always on the East Coast. We'd always get together, we were looking at each other like "when's this gonna happen?" We finally committed to doing a record –'Saudades de Rock', in 2007 and we toured in 2008-2009 and it was great. Then Nuno got the call from Rihanna and we encouraged him, what a great opportunity playing with her and the musicians are second to none in that band. So, we thought, I'm gonna go back work with my brother, finish a project I did with Hurtsmile. The Rihanna thing just lasted a bit longer than everyone expected. So, the Pornograffitti offers came up, which we never did, we did four shows in 2012 in Japan and we played Russia and China for the first time ever. We're ready to go in the studio, we're writing separately, throwing things back and forth, and it's all been… the frustrating thing's been all the scheduling. So, this 'Pornograffitti' serves two purposes. We were very excited to do it but I was the sceptical one to do it in the order of the record and I'm happy to say I was wrong.

Why were you sceptical? Because there are quite a lot of bands that are doing that kind of thing and it always goes down really well.

Right, well you know, what the audience perceives and what the band perceives as their best work, 'Pornograffitti' was a great record, we're very proud of it, we were looking at the production as a little bit dated, but the songs were there, 'More Than Words' obviously, 'Get The Funk Out' and 'Hole Hearted'. My scepticism came… I had no problem wanting to do the record, it was the order, which was the chronological order, it's like 'More Than Words' was the fifth song in the record, and I'm like, I can't sit down and sing 'More Than Words', you know, we always did that a little later in the set. But we did it in Japan and doing it on this tour in Europe it's been incredible, because the audiences are being great, they've been young audiences and they were singing all the songs. We're meeting kids, or meeting adults that say they were turned on by the record when they were 13 - too young to see the band and of course because we kinda split up for a while, they never saw the band. I know that's a long-winded answer!

I wanted to ask you about this, purely from a selfish point of view, because I know I'm involved in it. When Nuno was over here with Perry Farrell, I sent a couple of lads from Liverpool to the show because they were such Extreme fans and they were really young. I said "Nuno's playing with this band in Manchester, you have to go. I can't, I'm away that week, but you guys have to go!" They met Nuno in the pub across

the street, told him what massive Extreme fans they were and then Nuno said that he called you!

Yes, I remember, I remember that exactly! Nuno called me and he put on the kids and they were huge Extreme fans and they were like "When are you gonna play? When are you gonna play?" And it was great, it was great for Nuno. Nuno was saying "I'm on the Rihanna tour and I'm seeing signs saying 'We love Extreme'" and he'd meet a handful of Extreme fans at the shows and I was smiling because I'm like, yeah okay, that will get him out of Rihanna quicker!

Did you not realise that there was such a huge love for the band, still in the UK and in Europe?

Well, you know, I just had coffee with my manager and he was saying "this is the biggest show of the tour", Manchester was sold out for a long time, and I think there was 2,500 people. What I've noticed is the meet and greets. I don't want just to sound bold or anything, but when I was in Van Halen for that short period of time and the fans would come and meet those guys, I was like a spectator, I mean I'm younger than them, I was in the band, but I would witness these fans coming to the Van Halen brothers and they grew up on them. This run with Extreme here, not all, but I'm seeing a similar thing - and I'm not trying to put us on a level with Van Halen.

No, but it's your time to enjoy that.

Yeah, I don't think we're elder statesmen just yet, we're not taking our encore bow, but when you see the show, we are still full of piss and vinegar and we're enjoying it. To see the fans and the fact that they grew up on the band, I'm going "wow", you know? I guess we are in a different era, where these fans have grown up on the band and it's a thrill, it truly is a thrill. We are all blown away by it!

And of course, next April you are doing the Monsters Of Rock Cruise. I've done the last two and oh my God, it's a blast.

Is it? Yeah, that's what I hear.

It's just fantastic. The best bit is going on Monster Island, everybody just hanging out, you're having a swim and Mike Portnoy is next to you! It's just awesome. Nobody bothers you. Once you get there, people are happy just to have you hanging with them and watching the bands. I mean, one of my favourite memories is watching Keel playing, and Frank Hannon from Tesla is right down the front with his fist in the air, singing along to every word and then when Loudness played, every single guitarist on the ship was standing there in front of Akira.

That's good to hear because you have a little apprehension of being on a boat. For every thirty great fans is this one crazy one you know, but that's good to hear. We are looking forward to it.

Also, I was told to say hi to you from Jeff Scott Soto. He is one of my best friends and he played over here last week. So, when I said that I have finally got my passes sorted out, "please say Hi from me", so I promised him.

Oh yeah, I love Jeff and tell him, he is the only guy that I would not be angry about if he's got the Queen gig instead of me.

I think he should have got it before Paul Rodgers. He went through all the auditions and the rehearsals and everything, but because he wasn't a big enough name, the management got antsy.

Yeah, well he's got the pedigree, but let's just say I should've got it before Adam Lambert (laughs). Jeff's a great singer, great artist. I've been a fan of him even before I was his friend.

So you've mentioned about Nuno doing all this touring with Rihanna, how much time does that mean you actually have to do things together? Do you just have to fit it in as and when you can?

"I don't think we're elder statesmen just yet, we're not taking our encore bow, but when you see the show, we are still full of piss and vinegar and we're enjoying it."

GARY CHERONE

Yeah, last year was a little bit difficult, but we're mapping out some time to record before the end of the year, we may be even touring in South America and might make a Canadian run, maybe with 'Porno...'. We love doing it, but as a band, as artists, we feel we owe it to the audience, we owe it to ourselves, we need new music even if we record just a couple of songs. If we end up doing a tour for another month, we gotta get some music out, just get it out to our fans, play one new song. We always did that in the past. Of course we're doing the majority of show with 'Pornograffitti', we come back for an encore and do some of the back catalogue, which is fun, it makes it kind of a two part show. So we are enjoying this tour, but we gotta go through a few hoops. We were rehearsing for this tour in LA at Nuno's house and we already started jamming on new stuff, so that's the best way, to get the four heads in the same room and bash out some music.

And in the middle of all that you've mentioned working with your brother on some Hurtsmile stuff. What about solo material? Have you been writing anything for yourself?

It's funny, there's some stuff that I write and it could work with Hurtsmile, may work with Extreme and then sometimes, I think it might be a little outside those windows. But with Extreme, me and Nuno, we never wrote and said "this is Extreme", because I think anything that comes out of me or Nuno IS Extreme. So, whether it was 'When I First Kissed You', I came and sang the melody to Nuno, and we were like, yeah let's do it, so that's how it's been in the past with me and vice versa. I remember 'Peace' for the last record - 'Saudades de Rock', was one of the last songs that we wrote and it was a piano ballad, but I think anything me and Nuno write can be Extreme. It doesn't conform to Extreme, it's just becomes Extreme. So, you know, there was stuff I did in the mid 2000's, kinda like that soul-pop stuff, that solo stuff that I was working on with a few different writers, that was fun. To me all those things are unfinished, you know, whether it was Tribe Of Judah, the second record with Hurtsmile we were gonna put up by the end of the year and do some shows, maybe get to Japan. I'd love to come to Europe with it, but, you know, economics.

I know only too well, and from that, how do you see Extreme moving forward in the future?

I always tell these guys the world is ours, we can get it if we want it and the band can be bigger than it ever was. We had the opportunity to play some festivals on this run with Aerosmith. Europe's always embraced Extreme; the European festivals, as opposed to the American festivals which are more segregated. The European festivals can have different types of acts on the same bill and I think that's why Extreme flourished in Europe, so when we come over here, we look at each other and we go, you know, this can be - why not. Heritage is not a bad thing, Aerosmith is a heritage act, they put out new music, the go out, they play their catalogue, they play a couple of new songs, that's what bands do when they are around for so long. You play China for the first time, this is the first time those kids are gonna hear 'More Than Words', so you embrace that and you play the music that got you to the dance - that's what you do and that's where we're at right now. So, we wanna play new music, we feel like we are just as hungry, it's just as vital, the music is not dated and tonight you'll see it, it's a hungry band, it's a band that enjoys playing with each other and that's not hype!

Well, all the shows are sold out, so that speaks for itself!

And it certainly wasn't just hype – the show was absolutely awesome. I can't wait to hear the new Extreme album and plenty more tours in the future.

CJ WILDHEART

Words by Steven Reid. Picture by Trudi Knight

Reinvigorated through touring once more with The Wildhearts and recording with an assortment of Wildheart related chums for Ginger's recent '555%' album, CJ Wildheart returns with his second excellent solo release, 'Mable'. Now you may be asking yourself, what sort of name is that for an album? The only answer I can give you is that it's named after CJ's favourite chicken! So does that make Mable the world's first ever Rock n' Roll chicken…?

"Ha ha…I've no idea, although Mable herself prefers Drum n' Bass!" the guitarist begins, before going on to explain why he's been away so long. "At the end of 2009 The Wildhearts had just finished touring 'Chutzpah' and I was about to turn 40. The tour was not the best we've done and to be honest I was fed up with it all. The drama, the fact that the band was playing to smaller and smaller audiences, I needed a change. I jacked in music and got a day job, in fact I started my own cleaning company. It was the most grounding thing I've ever done and the reason I came back to music… hey sometimes you just need to grow up. Doing a regular job made me realise how lucky I was to have survived for so long on making and playing music. I will never take that for granted again."

So five years down the road from the last Wildhearts album and eight on from his debut solo release, '13', why is now the right time for CJ to be treating us to solo release number two?

"Well I got married, sold my business and moved out of London to Yorkshire. After spending six months renovating my new home, my wife finally had enough of me pottering around and laid down the law… 'Get a job or go back to music.' Music won and I started working on 'Mable' and thank God I did!" As has been the way for the extended Wildhearts family, CJ utilised the 'Pledge' system to help fund his music. "I was a little wary of the 'Pledge' thing and to be honest I was really nervous as it had been years since my last solo album and over three years since I had last recorded anything. The campaign went really well and it was such a high hitting 100% in one evening, a target I thought it would take weeks to hit. There are a lot of good people out there and some of them believed in what I was trying to do… it's a great feeling."

Lyrically 'Mable' comes across as an insight into where life has taken CJ in recent years…

"It was quite a challenging process getting in the right head space before I started, as I said earlier, I'd not recorded for a while so I was a little off my game. I had a ton of material to write about via my day job, which was full of characters and experiences which were all new to me and I still have tons to write about. You need to reveal something of yourself when writing but I always keep something back, I am very private but I do realise I have certain experiences people can connect with." Although not everything on the album is brand spanking new. "I did a demo of 'Come With Me' in 2007 and forgot about it. When we [The Wildhearts] were working on 'Chutzpah' I found my old demo and played it to the guys, who liked the intro riff, so we built a new song around it. I thought it would be a waste not to use my original song hence it ended up on 'Mable', plus the song means a lot to me as it's about my struggle with sleep and pills." And squeezed slap bang in the middle of the album, is a cracking cover of 'Vitriol', originally by Bluejuice, there's no doubt it's one of the songs of the year. "I just love that song. I would play it first thing in the morning when I was in my van heading to work. It's a get up and fuck you song… perfect to get you in the mood to graft. I remember the first time I saw the video and how much the song meant to me…Bluejuice are a very cool and funny band."

CJ is best known for working in group situation like The Wildhearts, the much missed Honeycrack, or The Jellys, and in truth even his previous solo album was a 'band' affair, so it comes as a surprise to hear just how much of a solitary activity 'Mable' really was.

"I love working on my own and I have a good set up in my house. I know how to record music; hey it would be strange if I didn't as I've spent so much time in studios. Why pay someone to record my album when I can do it myself? Plus working on my own is a lot less hassle than recording with a band. It's a really peaceful process, almost Zen like, and there is none of the drama that always surrounds musicians working in a group. I'm a bit of a loner so the fact that I can work on my own gives me strength. I love being in a band as well, and The Wildhearts is a huge part of my life, but it can sometimes get a little too much but that's the nature of that beast. I'm lucky I can get the best of both worlds, which keeps thing interesting and me on my feet."

Talking of The Wildhearts, they have been quite active on the live scene in recent times. Can we expect some 'P.H.U.Q.' anniversary shows maybe?

"I really hope we do some 'P.H.U.Q.' shows that would be really cool. We've talked about it and as long as we work around our busy schedules I can't see why it won't happen…" So live shows are a possibility, presumably a new studio album would simply be asking too much… "We have spoken about this but I think right now there is more chance of more live shows than a new album… but hey it is The Wildhearts so who knows. Recording with the guys is like getting back on a bicycle. We can take years off and then regroup and play like we never stopped… that's chemistry for you."

So, after the success of 'Mable', would it be fair to suggest that can we expect regular CJ Wildheart solo releases?

"Well, that is the plan. My first baby is due in the next month so I'm not playing live for a while. I'm going to start working on my next album over the summer and the plan is to keep on putting stuff out for as long as folks want to hear my music. An album a year would be cool."

And finally, we simply have to ask about CJ's Devilspit sauce…

"Well, my Mum has been making her own chilli sauce for as long as I can remember and I've used hot sauce on my food since when I was a nipper. I have hot sauce on just about everything I eat… I swear it keeps the soul young. Cooking is my first love and I have been thinking of doing a sauce for a while. When I sat down to think about my new album a hot sauce to come out alongside it seemed a like a great idea. I hooked up with a local company, Chilli Devil Sauces, and we made a sauce based on Chilli, Beer and BBQ and it's a humdinger… I think it's one of the tastiest sauces you'll find. I have another two versions of Devilspit coming out later this year so I'm very excited about that!"

Magenta's Rob Reed is a lifelong Mike Oldfield fan and inspired by his music, Rob decided to record a fully instrumental album, which isn't that strange. Though wanting to write play and produce every instrument on it is. Ian Johnson talks with Rob about this inspiration and why his love of Oldfield's music drove him to become a musician.

I read that you wanted to become a musician after you'd heard 'Tubular Bells' for the first time, when you were about seven years of age I believe. Why do you think Mike Oldfield's music had such a profound impact on you and other musicians?

Well to tell you the truth Ian, bizarrely the first version of 'Tubular Bells' I heard was actually by Jeff Love and His Orchestra. It was different from Mike Oldfield's because it was funky and jazzy but I loved it. So come Christmas that year, I was about six or seven I think, I begged my parents to get 'Tubular Bells' for me, which they did but it wasn't the Jeff Love one I'd heard but Mike's, so without the funky beats I had to get to know this deadpan version of the music again. Which I did by playing it to death and I fell in love with it so much that the opening piano refrain made me want to learn to play the piano. Which led me to ask my Mum and Dad to get me some piano lesson and the rest is history.

Did wanting to and becoming a musician come easily for one so young, or was it a headache for your parents to get you the music lessons you needed, so that you could learn to play as many instruments as possible?

No it wasn't easy. I hated practising you see, I didn't want to play all that music book stuff you have to learn and I started making up my own stuff in lessons which the teacher didn't like. She wanted me to play all the Classical compositions by Bach, Beethoven etc; but I wanted to play Pop music which she hated, so we always argued about music. So no it didn't come easy but I think you become two different types of musician when you have lessons, you either become the type who loves the Classical stuff and learns to read music or you become the type who learns to write your own stuff, improvise and adapt your skills to what you need. So long answer short, no, playing music didn't come that easily, you have to want it and want to work at it, to make it happen.

Onto the new album, 'Sanctuary', whilst being influenced by 'Tubular Bells' and Mike Oldfield, it isn't a copy or a clone of that work in any way shape or form. The melodies are different, more diverse and follow different patterns throughout the two musical passages. Did you feel that you had to keep away from sounding too much like 'TB' when you wrote the music for the album?

Well when I decided to do it, it just seemed like the natural thing to do. I hadn't been working on it for years or anything, it was just an idea that came into my head and I thought, yeah why not, let's give it a try. And I definitely didn't want to copy 'TB'. If you look at my work with Magenta or Kompendium you'll know that I play a lot of the instruments on those albums, so doing 'Sanctuary' was a natural progression from that really. People had, you see, always known of my love of Mike Oldfield's music and asked when are you going to do something like that, and at the beginning of the year, I just decided to give it a go. So January 1st I started and about five weeks later it was done. I must say it's the most enjoyable album I think I've ever worked on.

On the back of the CD cover it lists the twenty-two instruments that you play on 'Sanctuary' including Tubular Bells. Did you have to learn to play anything specifically for the album?

Well most of it was just blind faith. I can play piano, guitars, bass and so on, so I could have a go at most of the instruments, it was when I wanted to use the more orchestral instruments that I needed advice. I rented them from the Welsh National Opera and this guy turned up with all these instruments in a truck and once we'd got them into the studio, the look on his face as I bashed away on them said it all. He said "Do you want me to play this stuff" and I said "No", because that would have defeat the object of what I'm trying to do. So instead he told me where to hit things and how to strike this or that instrument and in the end, Thank God, it worked because it would have been much easier just to play all the instruments on a synthesiser but I just loved the challenge of physically playing real instruments and I'm so happy with how the album came out.

What can you tell us about the vocals on the album, which are by Synergy, who you've worked with before. They seem to be nonsensical words, yet they still fit in so well with the themes of 'Sanctuary'.

Well I've always thought of vocals as just another instrument and I love what Synergy do and your right, they are just sounds rather

than words but it works within the context of 'Sanctuary'. I'm a big fan of composer Karl Jenkins who uses this kind of vocal and you'll be surprised to know not a big fan of lyrics (laughs), so I love using this non-word kind of vocal style on albums. Also you can, I think, communicate great emotion and feeling without actually using real words.

The production on the CD is amazing and I know you asked Tom Newman and Simon Heyworth, both producers on the original 'Tubular Bells' to work with you on the album. Were you pleased and surprised that that they said yes?

Actually what happened was that I'd produced the album myself almost finished it and I thought I'd done something special but I wanted to have an outside opinion, from someone who would be brutally honest but also someone who knew Mike Oldfield's music in and out. So through a mutual friend I got the album to Tom and Simon and if they had come back and said I'd crossed a line, or it was rubbish, or too much of a copy, then I would have honestly binned it. So Tom listened to it and got back to me and said it's pretty good but I've only had the chance to play it on my computer, so I asked if he could jot down a few notes on the production and he said "Yeah I'll get back to you". Two days later he calls me and says "I've played it properly now and it's really, really good and I'd like to help out anyway I can. I'd like to have a go at the mix because I think I could tweak things here and there and get maybe 20% more out of it for you". So I sent him all the recordings of the lead instruments and he'd re-queue things and tweaked the mix of a guitar or bass line here and there and we'd exchange ideas and work on things together. Simon mastered it for me; and they really lifted the album and they've both been so supportive of the album and have said they love it and that's been the biggest pleasure for me. Also you'll have to check out the 5.1 mix we've done for the album which is amazing.

Finally Rob will touring in support of the album be difficult, as it's primarily just you. Or could you, like Mike Oldfield, record yourself and a group of musicians playing the whole of 'Sanctuary' for a future release DVD release?

I'm hoping to tour Ian but like the Kompendium album, getting people together to work on such a big project isn't going to be easy. Yeah I'd love to do a filmed show with a group of musicians doing the album, it's just putting something together that doesn't cost the earth. I have a couple of ideas and it's a big concept but the whole of 'Sanctuary' is scored so it can be done and my plans are to be out there by the end of the year in some way, shape or form touring and playing this album to everyone. So hopefully I'll see you all then.

NOVEMBER-7

November 7 is a Modern Metal band based in Switzerland but is made up of multi-national members. They formed back in 2005 and their full debut, 'Season 3', came out in 2011; now N7 are back with their follow up 'Awaraxid 7mg'. Dave Scott caught up with vocalist Annamaria Cozza and guitarist Stephane Geiser to talk about their latest release.

How did you came to use the name November 7?

A: There is not really one exact reason for it; the band…well Stephane Geiser and myself got together for the first time in the month of November (2005) so that's part of it. Basically what we really wanted to have as a name was a date because we just thought that would sound cool. After we picked the month, seven is one of my favorite numbers so I had to put a seven in there and that's why we are called N7.

You have a very unique sound; how do you describe it?

A: We are not very good at describing our own style. We leave this task to the people listening to a diverse variety of styles, they choose labels better than we can. Personally I like the label Industrial Metal because I think that there is a good balance in our music of heavy guitars and electronic samples but then again some people can also hear a lot of Gothic and melodic influences in there as well.

Can you give our readers a quick insight into how you reached where you are today?

A: When we originally got together for the first time, we didn't really have a specific plan

WOVENWAR

Wovenwar has become the new full time-project for the members of As I Lay Dying and with their debut album just released on August 4th, it sets a new positive path for Josh Gilbert, Jordan Mancino, Phil Sgrosso and Nick Hipa - fronting Wovenwar will be guitarist Shane Blay from Oh' Sleeper. The band have extensive touring plans ahead, with US dates supporting Black Label Society and festival appearances in the UK and Europe. Shane Blay and Jordan Mancino talked to Lara Kisel.

Can you introduce the band members and give an insight into the origins behind forming Wovenwar?

J: Well the band consists of Shane Blay (lead vocals & guitar), Josh Gilbert (vocals & bass), me…Jordan Mancino (drums), Phil Sgrosso (guitar), Nick Hipa (guitar). The origin of Wovenwar was a decision made to continue playing Metal together, Phil, Nick, Josh, and I, after Tim Lambesis' first arraignment and initial arrest. At that point we knew things were going to be different given the information

on what to do and how to do it. So we just got together and started to compose and that's how, in 2006 and 2007, we recorded two EPs where we started to try out some of the elements that would be particular to our sound later. We had our first line-up with one drummer (Gil Reber), two guitar players (Geiser and Yann Berger) and myself. Then we changed this in 2011 and we stuck to the idea of having two guitarists (Geiser and Matt Walters) and one drummer (Yann Siegenthaler). We also brought in a new element, somebody responsible for the whole sampling side and the machines on stage; he (Stephane Berginz) is kind of like our DJ, ha-ha. This is the line-up that brings us to the second album that has just been released.

Why did you decide to make this a concept album?

A: It interesting because we didn't decide it in an artificial way. The whole idea came up when we started to think, "What are we going to do with the CD cover?" We started discussing the possibilities and at that time, most of the songs were already written if not recorded. When we were discussing possibilities and actually looking at the texts of the album, I realized most of them were about "I would like to change my life" and "I see that my life isn't going in the right direction but I still cannot find the strength to do it and why is that?"; the "me" being a very empathetic person or any human being. Looking back when I wrote the lyrics, I realized that I talked to or met a lot of people in their forties and they were not really happy about their lives; they were complaining but they were sort of stuck. That's how we said, "it would be great if we could help these people with some kind of drug" and as we are from Switzerland we thought we have chocolate, drugs and banks, ha-ha. So we decided why don't we do something fun with the pharmaceutical business and that's how the whole idea formed. It was very important for me that this drug wouldn't be some sort of miraculous treatment that you wake up in the morning, you take and then your life changes. That's too easy, I don't like easy things and I don't believe they are really possible so for me it was really important then to develop the whole concept; what this drug does is that it opens your eyes and then you have to do the rest.

How does this album compare to your debut?

A: I think that compared to the previous album this one is more heavy; while you might have had some Symphonic elements in the first album, you have a more Industrial side to this one. I find the guitars are heavier, the whole sampling is much more worked and more complex and the whole result is more punchy in my opinion.

S: I think 'Awaraxid…' is more complete because we have improved our technical abilities a lot, it's therefore, maybe, more technical than the previous one; not all the songs but certainly on some. But I think the latest album still has a good continuity with 'S3'.

How does the album compare to what you had in mind when you started to compose?

S: My mind changed over the course because it's a long process, so it's not always the same. When I compose it's tough to explain, sometimes in one day I can virtually finish a song whereas other times in a week, nothing comes to mind. When I start to compose, it can start from a guitar riff or from the sound of a sample that I like; afterwards I try to find other parts. Sometimes I have a riff in my head and I then decide to add samples, I have to cut the riff in several parts so in effect you change the riff in the end, so it's not always the same as you had before or to start.

Did you work with Stefan Glaumann add (Rammstein, Within Temptation) to actually complete the album or was it all his work with some input from you guys?

S: Yes, I recorded all the guitars and the samples. Then I put all the files together to send to Glaumann. For example, for one song we could sometimes have sixty tracks, which is a lot. Then after that, I speak with him about finishing the song; when he has a first version he calls me and then we can finish because he can stream from his studio in Stockholm and I can listen in real time to what he is doing and we can finish the song like that. It's really nice to work this way but to be honest it's almost finished by that point because there are very few things to change because he is really great.

You are heading back out on the road again and returning to the U.K.; are you looking forward to it?

A: Oh yes…oh yes. We are touring the U.K. from August 12th to August 17th finishing in London. Actually you know when we came for the first time in 2012 it was really our very first time out of Switzerland so for us the U.K. is a special place because we associate it with our first gigs abroad. We are still working on getting some gigs at the end of the year but the U.K. for us is going to be the only tour this year where we leave home for ten days and we sleep in crappy hotels. It's going to be the real touring experience for us this year and I am and we are so looking forward to coming back.

received that day. We knew we wanted to stick together, but out of care and concern for our fans and supporters we thought it best to preserve the legacy of As I Lay Dying as it was before the "event" and start something new.

The debut album encompasses a new direction to previous work. Musically, what are you hoping to discover with Wovenwar and where can you see the music heading?

J:This record is securing our foundation as a new band and, I guess, the new stylistic direction. We know there is lots more to discover and the capabilities of this collective leave a great amount of room for growth musically and personally.

Is Wovenwar a chance for you to push the boundaries in your involvement with song-writing and your creative outlet?

J: Yes, that is a possibility; however, that was always applicable with everything I've ever been involved in including AILD.

How was the whole writing process and studio experience for this album? Were there any barriers crossed during this transitional period?

J: Writing and recording this album was great. One of the best studio experiences of my life and one of the most therapeutic times of all of our lives. Beyond the music, this is the first time in a long time that we all seemed on the up and up and our lives were now 100% focused on something positive and purposeful. There were still remnants of damage control with AILD during this time, but we saw the end of that era in sight and the beginning of an era in our lives.

Shane, you come from a similar background, being vocalist and guitarist for Oh, Sleeper. How did your musical voyage begin?

S: When I was seven years old, I was sitting at my dad's house watching 'Full House'. It was the episode where they went to Hawaii and the Beach Boys played. I saw the guitar player playing on TV and I thought that was the coolest thing ever. Ten minutes later I told my dad that I wanted him to teach me, so he did. That started my journey as a guitarist, ha-ha. I didn't start singing until I started Oh, Sleeper, and we wanted to have some singing…our bassist just threw me into the vocal booth and I tried it out. I'm glad I did, since it got me the job fronting Wovenwar eventually. I'll be playing guitar in Wovenwar as well, so it won't be much different from what I'm used to.

Oh, Sleeper has a strong following; how will this coincide with Wovenwar?

S: My main focus will be Wovenwar from now on. OS has been my heart and soul for almost a decade, but we are all branching out into other avenues of life. Micah has an amazing lighting business that he's putting most of his time into, I'm in Wovenwar, the other guys are getting married…we will play shows for archers when we can.

How are you looking to win over a new audience?

S: We've been practicing our asses off and just crazy excited for all these opportunities. I still can't believe they asked me to sing for them, and I can't believe BLS asked us to go out with them for our first tour, and I can't believe all the love the fans have been throwing our way. When we play live, all we can do is show people the same love back and see what happens.

J: We can't wait to play this record, hang with fans past and present…oh and to hit up Nando's and savor that Peri Peri biz. See you in August!

TAZ TAYLOR BAND

The Taz Taylor Band recently released album number four, entitled ´Deja Voodoo´. The band was formed following Taylor´s solo album, Caffeine Racer in 2004. The next year saw the release of ´Welcome To America´ with Graham Bonnet on vocals. In 2008, following two international tours and a very abrupt parting of the ways with Bonnet, a second line-up was formed. Keith Slack (ex MSG) became the new singer and ´Straight Up´ was released the following year. Since then, the Taz Taylor Band has concentrated on instrumental albums and ´Big Dumb Rock´, released in 2010, set the standard that ´Deja Voodoo´ has built on. Rob McKenzie spoke to Taylor, UK-born and now a US citizen based in San Diego, to get the latest news.

Your line-up seems to be quite settled now; can you take us through the band members?

Val Trainor has been in the band since 2006 on drums and we have had Barney Firks on bass since 2010. The line-up had been stable but we are a trio now; Josh Weinstein had been playing with us for the last two years on keyboards but he will not be touring with us.

We play instrumental music but it is not typical instrumental Rock. I write all the music and it is in a Classic, old school Rock style – late 70s early 80s; I grew up on MSG, Gary Moore, early Van Halen, the first few Ozzy albums – that kind of European-tinged Hard Rock. Most instrumental music is overly complex and almost to impress other guitarists. I start writing and it could just as easily turn into a vocal song, I use the verse and chorus parts and do the instrumental highlights of them. It is not overly complex or clever.

Your switch to instrumental albums has been a good move by differentiating you from the majority of West Coast bands, are you happy with how it has gone?

Instrumental music is definitely in the minority for nearly all styles of music; so it makes us stand out. People come up to us after a show and say they love it because the songs are instrumentals; other people say we will go really far if we had a vocalist. You can´t please everyone!

Being based at the southern tip of California, you seem to be the go-to support band for any touring big name band playing in San Diego?

We have found our niche; we have been doing this for ten years. Calling it the Taz Taylor Band was a smart move because that has enabled it to last as long as it has; we have had about five drummers, four or five keyboardists, a couple of singers and bass players! As long as I am still here, there will always be a Taz Taylor Band. The club owners in San Diego know us and when bands like UFO, MSG and so on come here, we are one of the first calls to open the show for them.

What were the reasons behind reissuing ´Straight Up´ [with vocalist Keith Slack (MSG)]?

Looking back it was a strange thing to reissue ´Straight Up´. It was issued originally in 2009 on the Escape label but not in the US and also we didn´t tour it, which was a mistake; it didn´t get much promotion which was a shame. So in late 2009, we started preparing for ´Big Dumb Rock´ which was back to our instrumental roots. A few years later, we then remixed and remastered ´Straight Up´, so it would get a US release. We took the opportunity to change a few things on it and we also had stunning new artwork by Tristan Greatrex; the album was released as a remix in 2012. The idea was to get a local singer and promote the album; however the relationship only lasted for one gig and so we went back to being an instrumental band!

You are still a Gibson Explorer advocate, right?

It´s been my guitar of choice for a really long time; I have given up experimenting with other guitars. My friend Andy Harrison played in a local band called Traeter when I was just a teenager in England and I thought he had the best guitar tone I had ever heard live and that was an Explorer. He sold it to a store in Wolverhampton and I then went and bought it; I kept it for a long while and then traded it for a Les Paul which I regret doing now. A few years later, I switched back to an Explorer.

What feedback have you had on your most recent album, ´Deja Voodoo´?

Most of our sales are local; although we play the same area, we keep on selling! It is the complete opposite from when we did ´Welcome To America´ [with Graham Bonnet] where all our sales were online. I´m a big proponent of not giving music away; if someone doesn´t want to pay ten dollars for an album, they probably won´t listen to it if they were given it free.

´Deja Voodoo´ sounds a lot more refined than ´Big Dumb Rock´, was that intentional or is that news to you?

I think it's the best production we have had. We have gone back to the same studio and producer so many times; we probably ought to change but it´s like we are honing our sound there. ´Deja Voodoo´ is the best we can sound in that room; it has the warmth but with clarity. I love ´Corridors Of Power´ by Gary Moore, the guitars are so up in the mix. He believed the guitar should be heard in a guitar solo! My producer and I had the same idea for ´Deja Voodoo´!

My favourite track is ´Coliseum´ which I am guessing is a bit of nod to MSG´s ´Into The Arena´?

It doesn´t sound similar but the arrangement is. ´Into The Arena´ is my favourite song so I thought - let´s try a song with a similar format. It starts on a different key to the main key of the song which is the same idea. I also like to change a key in the middle of a solo rather than at the start of a section. Another similarity is the keyboard breakdown before the solo. I hoped people would notice the Schenker references.

You are touring the UK soon, where can people get to see you?

Each venue will have a locally based support act. We are playing eight shows in eight days from 30 August, starting at The Thunderbolt in Bristol, then The Diamond in Notts, the Cellars at Eastney near Portsmouth, the Robin 2 in Bilston and then the King Billy in Northampton. As we don´t have a vocalist we don´t have to worry about having a rest! We then play at the Prince Albert in Brighton, The Carlisle in Hastings and finally at Riga Live Music in Southend-on-Sea.

We figured it was time to headline again and that the UK was a good place to start. It was with Graham Bonnet in 2007 that we played there last and we are a way better band now.

Further details of the Taz Taylor Band can be found at the website www.taztaylor.com

The Power Metal/Hard Rock German outfit comprising the two ex-Helloween members, singer Michael Kiske and guitarist Kai Hansen, along with American bassist Dennis Ward, Krokus guitarist Mandy Meyer and ex Pink Cream 69 drummer Kosta Zafiriou, released their second album on 1st August. **Mónica Castedo-López** *with Kiske and Ward, to hear about the powerful 'Light of Dawn'.*

The tracks seem to follow perfectly on from your debut album. What is your feeling?

Michael Kiske: Absolutely. We grew out of the first and into the second. I think the main difference is that it went down much easier because we know each other now, we have been on stages together and we have a feeling for what the band is like, so that all went into the second record.

Dennis, being the reputable producer that you are, is it difficult to produce your own albums?

Dennis Ward: It can be but I guess it's not anymore. I've been doing this since 1994, so it is nothing new to me and it is the same as being a bass player and a song writer, or a bass player and a singer, just another attachment to what you do already, so it's not a big deal.

MK: I would suggest that it is even better because he is passionately more involved in his own kind of thing, whereas for other bands he simply does a professional job.

Michael, would you say that he has more of a say because he is the producer?

MK: Sure! We all have our ideas and he definitely respects them. He wouldn't be happy if I was totally unhappy.

DW: There is no point.

MK: In the end, if Kai wants the guitars louder and the vocals lower, and I want the guitars lower and the vocals louder – which is pretty often the situation – he has to make a decision. If he is insecure about something, then we vote.

In terms of writing, was it mainly Michael and Kai in charge?

MK: Kai didn't have the time to write on this album as he was busy with Gamma Ray. I wrote a few songs and Dennis wrote almost 80%. Dennis had an unbelievable output of good songs and good ideas. We kissed his feet every morning, ha-ha!

I can see some of the tracks will be amazing live, like 'For The Kingdom'. Do you think that will be the first song you do a video for?

MK: We actually shot the video for the song 'Exceptional'.

My favourite!

MK: Aha! I heard that a few times! They wanted to go for 'Your Time Has Come' but I didn't think that was a song for a video. For me it was clear it had to be 'Exceptional'.

When you play live, do you think you'll have to drop some of the old songs?

DW: Sure, but it depends how long we play.

MK: We will always play one or two of the old songs, at least as long as Kai and I are in the band, but now we have two records so of course we want to establish this band. Kai and I were part of Helloween, but we are not trying to be Helloween, so it is just an extra for the fans.

DW: Also we need to try the new songs live because some songs may sound fantastic but don't come across live and vice versa, and that is always an issue when you have something you really like and then you find out that other songs work better.

We did our first interview in February 2012 when the debut album wasn't out yet. How was that release received by fans of Helloween and Pink Cream 69?

MK: It was divided. Some people loved it, some were a little disappointed because it would sound more like 'Keeper'. In general it was very good, but the reaction for this one is just positive, at least to the single, which is what is available so far.

On the EP you have four live tracks recorded at the Masters of Rock, Czech Republic. Why did you decide to pick that specific gig?

DW: We didn't decide it. They recorded it anyway, so we had it at our disposal. It's a big festival and I'm happy they recorded us because I like big open air live shows much more than concert halls. Sonically it's easier to work with. I mixed a lot of live records in the past and big and small concert halls are difficult, but open airs are always easier, and we had a good night, we played well. So we used it to give something good to the fans. We actually wanted to do five songs in total, but in the end we put in four live songs and two studio songs.

The track 'You Come Undone' is exclusive to the EP and will not feature on the album.

MK: I like that song a lot and thought it should have been on the album, but everybody thought it was a good idea to have it just exclusively there.

DW: It's something special.

Which of the new songs on the album would you highlight and think you will play live?

DW: 'Exceptional' is going to be there for sure, and 'For the Kingdom'.

MK: 'Your Time Has Come' is being received so well it's probably going to be there too.

DW: We are going to go for the ones that people give the most attention to. I've been trying to make a habit out of asking people to go to our homepage and leave us comments when the album comes out and give us their favourites, because that means something to me. I've got a feeling we'll try almost every song first and see how it goes, and how we feel. The most difficult thing about preparing for a live show is choosing the songs.

MK: Some songs go even better live than in studio. When you play a song you just feel if it connects with the audience or not, but for me it's not only fan reaction, it is whether it is fun to sing. If a song is wearing me out I tend to want to sing another one. Most of the time songs that people think are difficult to sing are not. What wears me out is when something is monotone. I'd love to play in the UK again. If people are interested in what we're doing they should buy the record so that promoters ask us to come and play.

DW: Visit our homepage www.unisonic.org and leave the comments on the guestbook. We are interested to know which songs are your favourites as it will be very helpful for us decide what to play.

Keep an eye on the Unisonic website for future live dates in the UK and check out the video online for the appropriately titled track 'Exceptional'.

The original quartet of Billy Sheehan, Eric Martin, Paul Gilbert and Pat Torpey reformed Mr. Big back in 2009 for a well received world tour, before following up with their comeback album 'What If…' in 2011. With commitments to a variety of other projects, there was some downtime for Mr. Big, but eventually news came out that a new album, 'The Stories We Could Tell', was on the way. More recently, news of a graver nature was released: drummer Pat Torpey had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. With the future of the band uncertain, die-hard Mr. Big fan James Gaden called a candid Billy Sheehan to hear about how the future looks for the band and to discover how the new album is set to be a triumph over adversity…

Your last album 'What If' was done spontaneously and in the moment. How did you have to approach this record?

Well, we had a situation beyond our control, which meant we had to make this record differently to any other. Fortunately, we've all done so many records together and so many individually, I'm confident we can make a great record under any condition, in my humble opinion. We had to adjust quite a bit, not just musically, but emotionally, due to the situation with our drummer Pat. It was a difficult thing, but Eric, Paul and myself got together many times and jammed, put together ideas and worked with each other as best we could. Once we had the structure of the songs together, Pat worked with a programmer who basically did Pat's drums parts, programming what Pat would have done with his sticks on a real kit, under Pat's direction. It was unusual for us, but I've played on a lot of records where the drums already existed. The ability to programme drums these days… there are a lot of great Rock records that come out now where there isn't necessarily a real drummer on them. Most Pop records don't have a drummer at all. That's no excuse, but under the circumstances, we wanted Pat's heart and soul on the record; his drumming feel and style. The only way we could get that was have drums programmed under his direction. Once that was done, we pieced everything else together around it. It was quite an adjustment for all of us.

That's why I was curious - the announcement about Pat's health was only put out relatively recently. As a huge fan I was gutted to read the news, so I can only imagine how it must have affected you guys in the band. It said he wasn't going to be able to play on the tour, you were looking at having him sit in here and there and be present for the acoustic portions.

We're hoping he can play with us as much as possible, however I'm concerned with Pat's safety. This particular affliction, Parkinson's Disease, makes it difficult for him to do long flights. I know Pat and I know how it happens with myself, when you're backstage, the lights go out and the crowd roars, that's quite a rush of adrenaline and he might end up pushing himself too far without realising it. He is definitely in a weakened state so I'm concerned. We will know for sure, probably the week before we leave in October, what the procedure will be for doing shows. We wanted to continue moving forward, also for Pat's sake, so he had a goal to shoot for. It's important sometimes to have a challenge to rise up to. We wanted to give Pat something to rise up to without forcing him, by any means. It's a precarious, upsetting catastrophe for the band. We love Pat and we want him to do as much with us as he is physically and mentally capable of.

You chose Pat Regan to produce the new record, who worked on 'Get Over It'. Did you choose him because you had worked together before?

Yes, Pat Regan is an old friend of ours, he produced a couple of my solo records and he's worked with Pat Torpey closely for years, that's how I met him, through Pat. We wanted to use someone who was close to Pat, who knew him well and could take into consideration what we were working with. Bringing in a new producer who we weren't familiar with, they might not have realised the depth of the situation we have here. The two Pat's are very close friends, and it was more comfortable for Pat to work with someone he was close to. Like you said, he only recently released the information, I've seen some of his friends in L.A. and they've said 'Hey, where's Pat, how's he doing?' and I've had to say 'Yeah, good…' because it's up to Pat how he let's people know. We have to let Pat deal with his situation how he chooses. So we were really fortunate Pat Regan was available and happy to do it. I've worked with him myself a lot and I'm supremely confident, because he can do anything! In the past, if there's been a problem with a recording, a live taping, something isn't right and you think it can't be fixed… call Pat Regan! He's a wizard.

How did you go about managing your schedules for this album?

We managed to carve some time out and we booked a little rehearsal studio to get together. Eric gave me a couple of songs to do lyrics for, I gave him them back, while I was on tour Paul and Eric worked closely together, then everything was run by Pat Torpey. So it wasn't easy but we did manage. We really wanted to get this record done for Pat, that was our extra special motivation. We're hoping Pat improves, but we don't know. I have no idea if that will happen or not, so we really wanted to get this record done with him. We cancelled anything we could and spent as much time together as possible.

The previous record was named 'What If…' which was a reference to the band getting back together in the first place. This one has been named 'The Stories We Could Tell'.

Right - just sitting around talking, we've

got a huge life changing situation. It's what happens whenever there's a monumental event, somebody is born, somebody is married, whatever, people sit and talk about it. 'Wait until I tell you what happened…' and the stories begin. In this band, all four of us come form different walks of life. We all have our stories of what we went through when we started playing; the early days, the adventures, shenanigans and catastrophes we've all been through. We tell a *lot* of stories and it's a lot of fun. Anytime an event happens… one time we came out of an airport in Singapore and we were almost killed by about 5,000 fans waiting for us, with no security! We had to run into the cabs and get out of there, it felt supremely dangerous. And that happened about five times. (laughs) But the stories we could tell from that… they can be entertaining, funny, and with our situation now, we can look back on the band and say 'Man, the stories we could tell…' There's an ancient old song by the Everly Brothers called 'The Stories We Could Tell' and it was one of my favourites. The lyrics say that if it all blows up and all goes to hell, in the end you'll have a great story to tell. That inspired us to mark where we are now. If you were to sit down with the band, the stories we could tell you! It's mostly performance art, I don't tell my stories unless there is an intimate group of people… and a glass of wine involved! In the end, you try to live with as much vigor and adventure as you can. If you do that, you experience incredible things, whether they are good, bad, crazy… when you relate them to other people, that's the earliest form of entertainment. We like our songs to tell a story. Iconic songs do that, you get a depth which you never get with songs that go 'I love you baby, but you broke my heart, now I'm crying'. That's not much of a story! Look at Johnny Cash songs, or 'Eleanor Rigby'… stories, put to music, penetrate people's hearts and souls.

One of the things I love most about Mr. Big is that not only are you four incredible musicians, but each of you are song writers in your own right. Does that mean there is a lot of material stashed away and stockpiled fans have never heard?

We got *tons* of stuff! (laughs) I'm the senior archivist and I've saved all the cassettes of all of our rehearsals, song writing sessions, practice sessions… I have a pile of cassettes that's literally about two feet high and three feet square. I took two dual cassette decks, so that's four cassettes at once, hooked them up to my recording setup and put up an eight track recording session. I had it set on auto-reverse so the cassettes would go right through to the end, and I just hit record and let them go. I transferred every single one to digital. I didn't even think I'd get through them all! There were *hundreds*. So I have all these recordings in a huge folder, many of them have been edited up already. Some reside in my collection personally. It's not just Mr. Big either, I've got David Lee Roth, Talas, UFO, pretty much every band I've ever been involved with. The Mr. Big archive has some really endearing, cool stuff. The cassettes were left rolling between takes so we have all the banter, the jokes and the fooling around, it's just great. Priceless stuff, listening to it is a real inspiration and a testament to how much fun we have in this band. At some point, if everyone gives permission, I'd like to make some of this available. The hardcore fans would really enjoy some of the stuff, and getting to hear how songs started out - start with a guitar riff, we discuss it, there's a part added, then a lyric and the next thing you know it's 'Alive And Kicking'!

I'd love to hear stuff like that. Being a die hard myself has cost me a fortune in Japanese imports for bonus tracks - a 'From The Archives' release would be amazing.

I'm the same, I spent a fortune on bootlegs and recordings of all my favourite bands. I've got tapes of the Jimi Hendrix

and The Band Of Gypsys rehearsals. I've got Genesis rehearsal and writing sessions for 'The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway'. All kinds of Beatles stuff - David Bowie's alternate takes for pretty much every song on 'Ziggy Stardust' - those are full takes with vocals. As a collector and a lover of all these artists and their music, that's money well spent. So being on the other side of the fence, being the guy making the records and being involved with them, I'd like to make as much available as possible, because it's what I'd want as a fan. I try to judge my activity and course of action as a musician looking at it from a fan point of view. I look and think 'I wouldn't want to hear that, but I'd want to see this video footage'. My collection is backed up and I'm at 1.5 Terabytes now… and growing. (laughs)

On the subject of great bands, not only are you the bass player in Mr. Big, but you've got the Winery Dogs too, with Richie Kotzen and Mike Portnoy. That's taken off and been really well received - did you expect to have that response with your first record together? The success of the Winery Dogs must have impacted on your Mr. Big plans.

I always hope for the best but you never know. You make a record and you roll the dice, wondering what number comes up! You never release anything you aren't sure about, you always put out something you believe in, but you can't ever know what the response will be. I've put out records thinking 'Man this is going to be fantastic!' and nothing happened! (laughs) With the Winery Dogs, instantly we were overwhelmed by the response. We then started getting tweets from people in really big bands, like the guys in Kiss, saying The Winery Dogs was their favourite record. We were supremely happy. We went and played our first show in Brazil. The record had only been out there for a day, and the crowd sang *every* lyric of *every* song. They were so loud, if you watch on Youtube, you can't even hear the band, just the crowd singing. And it had been out a day! That was so cool, and it continued, we ended up touring for a whole year. I love Mr. Big, but unfortunately with schedules, we can only tour once every two years or so. Guys don't want to tour as much, Paul's about to have a baby, Pat's got his son, Eric has his kids, they don't necessarily want to always be on the road. I however, have to play. I have to keep my hands in shape, that's my lifeblood, being on stage. When Mike called me, I was really pleased and it was never a side project, it was always a full on band. Of course, Mr. Big is still very much my heart and soul and I will always take time for it whenever I can, but I needed something more full time. All of this happened before the situation with Pat went down. It was fortuitous that I secured a place within another band that became successful, but all that came before I knew Pat might not be able to tour anymore, so I was sad because I had no idea what the touring future of Mr. Big would be. It was an emotional blow.

From a fan's point of view, I was just thrilled you reformed and toured. Then you released 'What If..' which was a huge bonus. The fact we're getting another record is just fantastic.

Great, that's nice to hear. I've not got the finished article, but what I have heard I'm very pleased with, which was a couple of sample mixes before they went to be mastered. I made a couple of tweaks and Eric made a couple of suggestions, but I think it's rolling now. I should be getting the entire package of songs very soon and I think people will be happy. I appreciate your and the other fans regard for Mr. Big very much. Pat is our drummer and we are delighted he was involved on this record. We have a London show planned too, so come down and see us!

Mr. Big released their new album 'The Stories We Could Tell' in Europe on Frontiers Records September 19th.

NEW RELEASES

HIGHLIGHT

SEVEN - SEVEN
ESM265 - Out 20th June 2014

Mick Devine - All vocals : Keith MacFarlane - Guitars
Simon Lefevre - Keyboards : Pat Davey - Bass
Austin "Oz" Lane - Drums. Special guests: Mike Slamer, Josh Devine, Lars Chris, Mark Mangold, Adam Wakeman, Fredrick Bergh, Didge Digital

In the 1980s every label wanted an AOR band and Polydor were no exception, setting their sights on Bournmouth based SEVEN. The band played arena support to several big acts and grabbed the attention of Phillip Schofield who proceeded to play their singles on his Radio 1 show. Despite a growing fanbase a full album never materialised but now in 2014 the wait is over. A very special album is finally coming your way!

AOR - L.A. CONNECTION
ESM266 - Out 18th Jul 2014

Featuring:
Tommy Denander - Bill Champlin - Paul Sabu - Jeff Paris
Sherwood Ball - David Forbes - Philip Bardowell
and many more...

Frederic Slama has continued to inspire us through the years with his « LA » themed releases. For this 13th album, AOR is flirting with heavier territories with songs reminiscent of Foreigner, Giant, Journey & Toto. The first class production by Frédéric Slama & Tommy Denander will leave you breathless and the legendary singers of «L.A Connection » will surely take Melodic Rock to new heights !
So it's time for the "L.A Connection" !

SCAR FOR LIFE - WORLDS ENTWINED
ESM267 - Out 29th Aug 2014

Guitarist Alexandre Santos started SCAR FOR LIFE in 2008, creating songs from the most vitriolic, groovy assaults to soft acoustic pieces, embracing all the influences that make them emotional and powerful. Now in 2014 with Rob Mancini (HOTWIRE, CRUSH) as their new lead vocalist, the band has finished recording 13 new tracks for their fourth album "WORLDS ENTWINED". The new album features a number of special guests such as Vinnie Appice (BLACK SABBATH, DIO), Neil Fraser (TEN, RAGE OF ANGELS), Michael Carlsson (LOVER UNDER COVER) and Anne Victorino d'Almeida.

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ALBUM REVIEWS

FIREWORKS GUIDE TO WHAT'S HOT AND WHAT'S NOT...

AOR
'L.A. CONNECTION'
(Escape) **Genre: AOR**
Reviewed by Ian Johnson

Frederic Slama, the French multi instrumentalist, song-writer and brains behind the phenomena known as the AOR project, returns with his new release; the eleventh in the series entitled 'L.A. Connection'. AOR (the band) have happily been releasing albums since 2000, filled with a form of music that sits at the lighter end of the musical scale (hence the bands moniker). Slama and his many friends (a who's who of AOR musicians) have kept things going, bucking trends and just playing sublime West Coast Rock which proves that there are a lot of people with taste still out there. The eleven albums by AOR all have a few things in common, namely the utilisation of many special guest musicians and singers, who help to breathe life into the songs written and produced by Slama.

On this CD alone you'll find the likes of Jeff Paris, Tommy (if AOR is mentioned I'm there) Denander, Paul Sabu, Tamara and Bill Champlin, Phillip Bardowell, Sherwood Ball, Bob Harris and even our own Pete Newdeck. The inclusion of artists such as these bodes well for what is to come and tracks like the opening salvo of 'On The Edge Of Glory' and 'The Pride Of Strangers' prove that Slama has lost none of his love for the smoother side of Rock music.

I have to say though that AOR fans of old, who enjoyed the earlier more West Coast flavoured releases, might be a little surprised at the harder more Melodic Rock edge that some of the songs on '...Connection' have running through them. 'Closer To Zero' where Denander riffs and solos like demon or the powerful 'Once Off Guard' with its great Paris vocal, show that AOR/Slama can Rock with the best of them and this musical light and shade makes the songs on this release some of the best that Slama has ever written. Just check out the 'Fool's Game' inspired 'Lost Souls Don't Cry' with its superb keyboard melodies, 'Exiled In Sadness' with its amazing guitar work, 'Circle Of Danger' on which Tamara Champlin shines (with her raspy almost Lulu like vocal), or finally the Bluesy mid-paced 'The Crystal Heart' where Denander's guitar sends shivers down the back of your neck as he plays and then tell me that Slama hasn't got this Melodic thing nailed down.

Eleven albums down and counting, if AOR/Slama can keep on coming up with such great sounding music, then I think that all of us who love the genre will be more than happy boys and girls.

WORK OF ART
'FRAMEWORK'
(Frontiers) **Genre: AOR**
Reviewed by Alan Holloway

Every so often, a band comes along and slots itself into the AOR world like it's been there forever, with Sweden's Work Of Art doing just that with the release of their debut album six years ago. Three years later, the superlative 'In Progress' took everything a bit further, filled with high energy songs, and right on cue we now have album number three in 2014, complete with "art" related pun title.

As before, WOA show that they know just how to kick off an album, this time with the incredible twosome of 'Time To Let Go' and 'How Will I Know', which are both instant attention grabbers guaranteed to have those in the know tapping their heads and wondering why the band aren't a lot more famous. Lars Safsund is again in fine voice, and as before, he also manages to stick his keyboards in at every perfect opportunity, never taking anything away from the happiness inducing chords of Robert Sall.

'Framework' (a greatest hits album called 'Gallery' is inevitable, surely) is an album for the summer, in the best West Coast traditions, although WOA aren't strictly a West Coast band, with an equal mix of pure AOR in there as well. Now I'll be honest and say that I found that the previous albums tapered off a bit towards the end, but 'Framework' does no such thing. There's eleven tracks, making it just about the right length, and to my delight the only wet ballad, 'My Waking Dream', is held off until last, although it's still a rather a nice song. For those who like tradition, this album's 'song with a girl's name' is 'Natalie', and the 'track that most sounds like Toto is 'Hold On To Love'.

Work of Art have come out swinging with album number three which features more upbeat, catchy summer tracks than ever before, each one replete with catchy refrains and capable of instilling in the listener the urge to buy an open top sports car and move to the coast. 'Framework' is "wimpy" stuff, for sure, but so beautifully crafted it will appeal to Pop and Rock fans alike (although Extreme Metallers may need some convincing). If it weren't such a horrendous cliché I would call it a work of art, so I won't, but it's certainly more fun than Tracy Emin's unmade bed.

THRESHOLD
'FOR THE JOURNEY'
(Nuclear Blast) **Genre: Progressive**
Reviewed by Ian Johnson

There are only a handful of bands whose work I always look forward to with anticipation. Threshold are one such act and over the many years that I have been a fan of their music, I can honestly say that they have never let me down. Threshold's ninth studio release 'For The Journey' can now be added to their great canon of music, as it is easily one of the best albums the band has recorded.

Again like all good records 'For…' takes quite a few spins before it gives up its melodic secrets but when it does – boy are you in for a treat. Richard West (keyboards), Karl Groom (guitars), Pete Morten (guitars), Damian Wilson (vocals), Steve Anderson (bass) and Johanne James (drums), have, after their triumphant return with 'March Of Progress' in 2012, cemented their place at the top of the Progressive Metal league table, with an album that keeps getting better, stronger and bigger with each successive play through. The production by Groom and West also enhances the songs on 'For…' until their dramatic musical vistas set up home in your subconscious. Only then do the complex interweaving melodies, hard hitting guitar riffs, emotion filled vocals and gripping rhythms really begin to make sense to you.

Space is limited so I cannot tell you about every song on the album (more the pity), so I'll stick with just a few that I love. Opener 'Watchtower Of The Moon' has some amazing guitar work from Groom and Morton, their interplay becomes the backbone on which the vocal and keyboard melodies of this song are constructed. The epic twelve minutes of 'The Box' seems to fly by and in what seems like only a few moments, you're no longer reveling in its full blown majesty. Wilson shines on this song and his emotional vocal delivery, brings the hidden depths of this wonderful song to the surface as you listen to it. 'Turned To Dust' is an up-tempo Melodic Rocker, with a great hook that you can't help but join in with after only a few plays and finally I'd like to mention the closing track 'Siren Sky'. This song screams Threshold, as all the elements you've come to expect from the band are here; complex arrangements, clever lyrics and incredible musicianship which have always been the band's calling cards; the whole song is a stunning piece of music.

I said in my review of 'March...' that it was a triumph... in equal parts classy, thoughtful, emotive and intelligent and I posed the question "Threshold's best"? I think now 'For The Journey' has taken that crown; their best definitely?

A ROAD TO DAMASCUS – 'IN RETROSPECT' *(Target)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

Aside from Mike Tramp and Lars Ulrich, I'm not very au fait with Danish Rock music. Oh, I know there's D.A.D., but I never really got into them so they don't count. It was therefore with interest that I charged up the iPod for the second album from Danish Poppy Punky people (was that an R.E.M. song?) A Road To Damascus, because I obviously need more Danish Rock in my life, and after a few spins (why do I still say that? Nothing spins anymore!) I've decided that you readers do too.

Since their debut, it is clear that the lads have tightened up a bit. Whilst their older stuff is fine and dandy, 'In Retrospect' has a brightly polished sparkle to it. There's elements of bands like Kids In Glass Houses and New Found Glory, tempered with the more thoughtful grandiosity of 30 Seconds To Mars and a pinch of The Goo Goo Dolls. If that's a recipe, then it's definitely one for success, as '…Retrospect' is an immediately uplifting, happy album full of Poppy melodies and sweet guitar riffs.

As soon as the pointless twenty-nine second intro finishes (why is it there? Why?), lead single 'All Said And Done' shows you what you're in for with a vibrant splash of melodic Poppy goodness, mixing keyboards and guitars at a fair old pace before slowing down for the bulk of the song. 'Different Eyes' shows the 30STM side of the band, with a nice, passionate performance from vocalist Mikkel that's not a million miles away from Chris Daughtry. Elsewhere, we get 'In Retrospect' which is a ludicrously upbeat, catchy song that really, really should be the second single. It's not an especially long album and this certainly works in its favour, as it whooshes by like a cat with a firework tied to its tail (this is a simile, not a suggestion).

So what we have here is a band that is begging to be discovered by anyone who likes a good bit of Pop Punk that's less frivolous than the likes of Bowling For Soup or Blink 182. A Road To Damascus have delivered a genuinely uplifting and catchy album that weaves its way through the listener's subconscious like a weavy thing (yes, I am out of similes) and just begs to be listened to again. The only thing that's made me happier today than listening to this is the fact I've gone through this whole review without mentioning bacon. Oh, bugger…

Alan Holloway

ACE FREHLEY – 'SPACE INVADER' *(Steamhammer/SPV)* Genre: Rock

Ace Frehley's last album, 'Anomaly', never really quite hit the mark with a lot of fans, and continued cancellations of European tour dates and sloppy live shows really tested the man's fan base. Therefore there is quite a bit is riding on this release – if only to establish his Rock credentials once again.

Having been a Kiss fan since 1980, I have come to expect little when it comes to solo outings from the Kiss crew, with Paul Stanley and Frehley's 1978 solo albums, and the first Frehley's Comet release, being the exceptions.

With Tommy Thayer donning the spaceman's make up in Kiss these days, it's time to remind people who the original spaceman is musically. Title track 'Space Invader' gives us classic Frehley, with chunky chords and a spaced out vocal. It's a strong start to the album - the chorus vocals are full and melodic, and the guitar work is the best I have heard from him for some time.

Sleazy Rock 'n' Roll is the name of the game with 'Gimme A Feeling', bringing to mind early Kiss and Hanoi Rocks. If you like the Joan Jett style of "back to basics" Rock then 'I Wanna Hold Your Hand' will be right up your street. 'Toys' has plenty of Frehley's quirky humour, and is somewhat autobiographical lyrically, sounding reminiscent of an eighties recording.

The sordid riffing contained in 'Change' is a reminder of what Frehley is capable of when he puts his heart into it, and it is at times like these that you really miss his contribution in Kiss. 'Immortal Pleasures' pulls in many directions, and comes out sounding quite Country Rock!

The closest we get to the Kiss years is demonstrated in 'What Every Girl Wants', which sounds like a left over from the Kiss album 'Rock 'N' Roll Over'. 'Past The Milky Way' trades in on the Frehley myth of being from another planet lyrically, and delivers a poetic grace in the cool Southern style of Rock.

Why Frehley decided to cover Steve Millers 'The Joker' is beyond me? It's a lazy version that offers nothing over the original in my opinion. It may have served him better to re-record something from 'Kiss Unmasked' – maybe 'Torpedo Girl' with a modern twist perhaps?

'Starship' is a strange mix of radio broadcasts and musical ideas all wrapped up in an instrumental that has a hint of Led Zeppelin, but in reality it really only works as a curiosity piece.

The album as a whole is some of Ace Frehley's best work since his Frehley's Comet debut and is as good (if not better) than anything Kiss have released of recent times.

Ray Paul

ADELITAS WAY – 'STUCK' *(Virgin)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

Adelitas Way go for a "less is more" approach on this, the band's fourth album; a growing trend in 2014 that shows that they aren't afraid to break away from the traditional Mainstream Rock that has served them well over the last three years. Indeed 'Alive' perhaps encapsulated this more than any other song, garnering plenty of airplay and boosting the sales of 'Home School Valedictorian' that spawned the Active Rock hits 'The Collapse' and 'Sick'.

Producer Nick Raskulinecz oversees the organic shenanigans this time around on an album that, although easily identifiable as AW, could be construed as something of a risk with its stripped back nature. First single 'Dog On A Leash' is about as close as it gets to AW of old and yet there's a charm and honesty to songs like the Nirvana-esque 'Blur', the power ballad 'Undivided' or the chiming jangly Pop of 'Keep Me Waiting'.

Perhaps Rick Dejesus has had time to reflect on the changing musical soundscape around him as Modern Pop has a noticeable influence on the song-writing this time around; the atmospheric echoes of 'Drive' have a certain Coldplay quality and the Enya-like orchestral embellishment on 'Something More' gives rise to the album's most commercial moment. 'We Came', the aforementioned '…Leash' and 'Save The World' provide the Rock element of the album, but it's rougher around the edges and you certainly won't find a 'Criticize' or an 'Alive' here.

It's clear that band's and labels alike feel that there's no future in the brand of Commercial Rock that has been the mainstay of Active Rock Radio over the last ten or so years. Strange when you consider how successful a song like 'Alive' has been. With the likes of Daughtry choosing the cringe worthy Pop approach in order to stay relevant, it is pleasing that Adelitas Way have chosen to remain associated with the Rock genre to evolve. Although it's undoubtedly a brave move, the band's star is rising and ultimately only time will tell if the tweak to their sound will translate into the success they deserve and vindicate the change in direction.

Mike Newdeck

ADVENTURE – 'CAUGHT IN THE WEB' *(Progress)* Genre: Progressive

Adventure, it's a simple name, yet one which evokes thoughts of everything from "Boy's Own" tales to space bound journeys or mythical ocean voyages riddled with peril and danger. And yet this third, and first for five years, album from Sweden's Adventure takes us through far more Earth based stories of everyday pitfalls and social challenges. The album's name, 'Caught In The Web' is a neat play on words, with the "web" in question being the one we while away hours and hours on every day.

Opening track, 'All Aboard', segues seamlessly into 'Fast Train', both again metaphors for the "use it, bin it, get rich quick, fame at all cost" culture we live in and yet while the themes and lyrics may be modern and current, the music transporting them to your ears is traditional Progressive Rock with the merest hints of something heavier; a sprinkle of Uriah Heep here, a whisper of Threshold there, the odd fluting float of Jethro Tull bouncing by.

Vocalists Terje Craig, Elen Catherine Hopen Furunes and Roar Nygard (guest) combine and separate beautifully; a mix of solo performances and male and female vocal interplay adding perfectly to the soaring keyboard work of Odd-Roar Bakken and Steve Howe like guitar forays from Terje Flessen. However as you pass through 'Solitude' (a lyrical theme across the album), it is the theatrical arrangements which drive the songs on, the loosely conceptual pieces arriving with added weight and poise. 'Empty Minds' provides more than a little oomph, although as much through flutes as riffing guitars, while 'Test Of Time' is happier combining Heep like Hammond to a more Neo-based keyboard approach.

However right across 'Caught…', which comes housed in a simply stunning cross between a "find it" game and a Rodney Matthews like, "Artwork Of The Year" contending sleeve, it is gently Progressive themes and ideas which bring the songs to their wonderful conclusions.

'Caught In The Web' is a magnificent Adventure and one worth exploring and reliving on countless occasions. If you're looking for me, that is where I'll be….

Steven Reid

ALAN KELLY'S SEVEN HARD YEARS – 'NO PLACE IN HEAVEN' *(Lynchburg)* Genre: Melodic Rock

Best known for his time as the drummer in U.K. Melodic Rock favourites Shy, multi-instrumentalist Alan Kelly has brought together some familiar names from the MHR scene to deliver his first solo effort, under the rather unwieldy moniker of Alan Kelly's Seven Hard Years. Now call me a cynic, but I can't help but notice that the acronym for the second part of that is SHY and neither has it escaped my attention that the band logo bears a striking resemblance to a certain U.K. Melodic act formed in Birmingham in the early 1980s…. a little blatant for my taste.

Looking to lean on that (albeit strong) link is understandable but actually it serves the broadly influenced material on 'No Place In Heaven' poorly, for it suggests a mere Shy copycat act and that really isn't, on the whole, the case. The involvement of Shy bassist

ACCEPT – 'BLIND RAGE' *(Nuclear Blast)* Genre: Heavy Metal

Three albums in to their 21st Century comeback and the Accept juggernaut is still steamrollering along. Wolf Hoffmann and Peter Baltes (as sole remaining original members) have steered this new, re-invigorated Accept to greater heights than first time around which in this fluid, ever-changing musical climate is something of a triumph.

'Blind Rage' carries on from where 'Stalingrad' left off in 2012 with American vocalist Mark Tornillo doing his usual top notch job of emulating the Germanic growl of original front-man Udo Dirkschneider. Hoffman is as musical as ever on guitar with his classical overtones embellishing the majority of the solos, particularly on 'Bloodbath Mastermind' which conjures up recollections of the astounding 'Metal Heart' era, and Baltes as reliable as ever with a solid bass line that resonates with powerful drummer Stefan Schwarzmann. Completing the line-up is the dependable Herman Frank who debuted on the defining classic 'Balls To The Wall' all those years ago after their breakthrough album 'Restless And Wild'.

Not surprisingly Accept begin with a stomping Metal anthem in first single 'Stampede', which is a solid, riff filled, Teutonic overload of Metalized aggression with a superb Hoffmann trademark, classically influenced solo thrown in. 'Dying Breed' and 'Dark Side Of My Heart' are both mid-tempo, typical Accept and whilst '…Breed' has an incessant dominating riff '…Heart' has a memorable melodic chorus that stays in your head.

There is a brooding, epic feel to 'Fall Of The Empire' with marching drums and choir-like backing vocals from the guys to accompany the melodic chorus and delving into Scorpions-esque territory on some of the riffs. This is as good a song as you'll hear from any Metal band this year and it gets better with each and every play. 'Trail Of Tears' and 'Final Journey' are typical fast-paced Accept Rockers with the latter featuring another excellent Hoffmann solo, whilst 'Wanna Be Free' and 'From The Ashes We Rise' are both anthemic Rockers; the former with an acoustic intro and lyrics pleading for a kind of utopia, the latter built upon an uplifting, hope-inspired lyrical theme, with big melodic choruses that pour from the speakers, demanding your attention.

'200 Years' is based on Hoffmann's vision of what the Earth would look like two hundred years from now if man suddenly disappeared with a darker feel and darker lyrics, but one of his favourites 'The Curse' is a mellow reflective number with accentuated melodic guitars.

As one of the leading pioneers of German Heavy Metal in the late 1970s we should be grateful to still have a band of Accept's calibre around putting out classy, relevant Metal albums to the faithful and new fans alike in the 21st Century.

Carl Buxton

Roy Davies (Lynchburg Records belongs to Davies and he also performs some bass on the album) is one connection to the past and the likeness at times between the voice of Line Of Fire vocalist Shawn Pelata to recent Shy singer Lee Small and on the odd occasion to the more readily associated Shy front-man Tony Mills, (who will be back with the band again for Firefest) being another.

Yet sample four of the first five tracks on this album and you'll find 'Angels Fly' hits gritty and hard with Pelata sounding very Nev MacDonald (Skin), 'Hold Me Now' possessing a chorus from the books of Def and Leppard, 'You Lie' almost House Of Lords-ish in its pompous strutting glory and 'No More Yesterdays' a keen mix of TNT melodic goodness and a bass line David Coverdale has sent out a search party to recover. However from there things level out, the slow tracks being standard Melodic Rock, the more up-tempo offerings satisfied to stick to a U.K. MHR blueprint, although never quite sleepwalking into tired or weary.

The performances are top notch, Pelata covering the styles with aplomb, Kelly flitting between keys, bass, guitars and of course drums with ease, while guitarist Dave Martin (Marshall Law) and bassist Martin Walls (After Hours) also add their considerable musical weight.

If the shimmering standard illustrated in the first half of this album was lived up to across the whole disc, then we may have been talking about 'No Place In Heaven' as a potential Melodic Rock Album Of The Year. As it is, it still marks out an impressive introduction.

Steven Reid

ALESTORM – 'SUNSET ON THE GOLDEN AGE' *(Napalm)* Genre: Heavy Metal

Alestorm started as something of a joke band, but they're definitely coming into their own with this, their fourth studio album. They're a scruffy bunch, but then these Dundonians are the only Scottish Pirate Metal band out there, so I guess they like to stay in character.

Founding a subgenre all their own, they serve up piratical rantings about women, alcohol and shenanigans and, time and again, they'll have you chanting along with dubloons in your pocket and a bottle of mead in your hand before the first chorus has ended.

Their latest treasure trove of booty is entitled 'Sunset On The Golden Age' and once again we are given a plethora of high energy ramblings with Chris Bowes gruffly growling along whilst playing his keytar. The mix of Power, Thrash and Folk Metal with the huge tongue in cheek delivery and the ability to have carried this on successfully for four albums is both a testament to the actual prowess of the musicians and to the writing ability of Bowes et al.

The finest on this current offering is the aptly titled 'Drink' – an ode to pirates, drinkers, vagrants… in fact, that's what all their songs are about, but it's just so much fun that you don't even care about the subject matter – killer squid, wooden legs, hangovers, wenches… it all fits the mould and I guarantee you'll enjoy every single minute of it, or you need a lobotomy! (Don't say that too loud though – they might just come round and oblige!)

Sue Ashcroft

ANBERLIN – 'LOWBORN' *(Tooth and Nail)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

It is with a heavy heart that I write this as one of my all-time favorite bands is calling it a day. Whilst I'm thankful that it's been done formally with a farewell album and world tour, I feel somehow cheated that Anberlin, despite their twelve years in the business, will forever remain a cult outfit – especially in Europe. The moniker of the most underrated band is an apt one and despite their musical talent, inventiveness and willingness to push boundaries, for Anberlin it is one that will stay with them as their many fans talk about them in revered tones. Even the two relatively disappointing major label offerings still had enough to suggest that Anberlin was something special and then when 'Vital' was released in 2012, it confirmed a new found passion, a return to form and a reunion with producer Aaron Sprinkle that was the bands best since the halcyon days of 'Never Take Friendship Personal'.

The seventh and final studio album is a fitting epitaph to Anberlin. It doesn't simply go through the motions and offer a soporific homogenous brew of well-worn ideas and generic predictability; it gifts genuine musicianship and a keen sense of dynamics and unpredictability. It's experimental yet cohesive and taps into everything great that this band has touched on over its career.

'We Are Destroyer' roars straight out of the trap in the crunching style of 'Self Starter' or 'Godspeed', Stephen Christian's instantly recognisable voice soaring like an eagle. The brilliantly penned 'Armageddon' chugs along incorporating haunting atmospherics and a captivating melody, whilst the Progressive, almost Neon Trees-like, Pop of the extraordinary 'Stranger Ways' goes someway to illustrating the band's infinite brilliance. 'Atonement' is in essence a simple song but given the full on expansive production and Christian's lilting vocals, it's one of Anberlin's classiest offerings to date and although the weird 'Dissenter' (featuring a yelling Christian during the verses) is perhaps a touch unconventional, it illustrates Anberlin's confidence in trying something new. With the brilliant straight ahead chiming Pop of 'Losing It All' and the powerful epic 'Hearing Voices', it only remains for the album to close out with the downbeat 'Harbinger'; an echoing, haunting, ambient song that closes not only the album but also the studio career of this unique and brilliant band.

Avid fans will perhaps have a tear in their eye as Christian sings his final farewells and calls time on Anberlin. With a world tour to follow – taking in these shores – there's still time to catch them live for the final emotional farewell. 'Lowborn' is a fitting finale to Anberlin's legacy and fine example of why they were held in such high regard by musicians and music fans alike.

Mike Newdeck

ANN MY GUARD – 'INNOCENCE DESCENT' *(Smash Fabric)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

Ann My Guard are a Female-Fronted four-piece Rock/Metal band from Hungary and 'Innocence Descent' is their first full-length release following the 'Cinderella Syndrome' EP in 2010 and 'Doll Metal' EP in 2011.

I'm reliably informed the creation process took six years and during that time a sizeable following has slowly been amassed in their home country. Enlisting the services of Gabor Vari is also something of a coup as he is regarded as the most renowned producer in Hungary and he has given the music a great big budget feel.

Composed of members Eszter Anna Baumann-Toth (vocals, bass), Krisztian Varga (guitar), Tagscherer Istvan (guitar) and Joci Vadasz (drums), AMG are a self proclaimed Doll Metal band (whatever that means) and the sound is primarily Gothic/Pop with a hint of Metal. A harder edged Paramore or Avril Lavigne would probably be a good reference but on the whole AMG have a strong identity of their own.

'Innocence…' contains thirteen tracks but 'Enchant', 'Hollow Red' and 'HKA Bitch' are essentially short intro/bridging pieces. The mood throughout the album is slightly downbeat and if I'm honest a few of the songs are too similar in structure and pacing. Toth's vocals have an ethereal quality, on top of some crunching riffs and hard-hitting musical passages, but I'm left thinking she could push herself further to garner more distinction. 'Ivory Ballad' and 'My Lullaby' carry the greatest commercial appeal but I'm pushed to single out any tracks for individual mention.

Ann My Guard can be proud of their first real album but I can't see 'Innocence Descent' raising the band's profile too much. There is certainly enough in place to make the next release interesting and if they can build on the promise shown here, then we may be talking about something special.

Dave Bott

ADRENALINE RUSH – 'ADRENALINE RUSH' *(Frontiers)* Genre: Melodic Rock

Young Swedish Female-Fronted Melodic Rockers Adrenaline Rush have really started life with a musical bang. Their debut album is full on, unapologetic, late eighties inspired, energetic Melodic Rock, with a touch of Sleaze and Glam that Mötley Crüe would be proud of! The album was written by Erik Martensson of Eclipse and W.E.T. fame, his involvement is obvious, but essentially though he has detached himself well from his other bands and written with a specific style and attitude in mind, and for me does a grand job. Whilst his touch is there, he has crafted a damn fine collection of sleazy, carefree, no frills, rebellious Rock 'n' Roll and if you're a fan of Martensson's song-writing talents, I see absolutely no reason at all as to why you wouldn't enjoy this.

Front-woman Tave Wanning fully emboldens the vocal persona of a "Rebellious Rocker" in her performances and I really enjoy her style and attitude. She has an exuberant nature and has the potential to be a rambunctious and highly entertaining live performer and with this collection of songs, she has plenty of crowd pleasing, sing along choruses in her arsenal. She may not have the range of other female vocalists like Issa or Lenna Kuurmaa, (which isn't needed on these songs anyway) but I love Wanning's attitude-dripping vocals and she just exudes Rock 'n' Roll rebellion.

Adrenaline Rush have a big guitar sound but they always have plenty of melodic hooks in them and killer melodious riffs are thrown at us frequently to a back drop of driven guitar progressions that give all those songs that energy and attitude needed. There is some truly awesome guitar work on here, not fastest finger bollocks, just good old melodic riffs that got stuck in your head just as much as the big choruses.

There is lots of "party-time" Rock that will have you cranking up the volume on your stereo for the likes of the rambunctious rocker 'Change', ballsy rebellious Rocker 'Generation Left Behind', Mötley Crüe inspired 'Girls Gone Wild' and the fist in the air, shout it out loud attitude of 'Oh Yeah!' There are some more straight-edged Melodic Rock tracks in the Gotthard like 'Want It All' and bright and soaring 'Too Young To Die' which not only add some light and shade to the album flow, but also a big dollop of uplifting feel good ambience.

What the songs may lack in emotion and depth is sure made up for with fist in the air inducing, shout it out loud choruses and sheer feel good awesomeness. Think Mötley Crüe style shenanigans and you'll be getting close to what the Rush are all about.

Paul Woodward

ARTHEMIS – 'LIVE FROM HELL' *(Off Ya Rocka)* Genre: Heavy Metal

The latest release from Italian Metallers Arthemis is a document of their eight song performance at the 2013 Hard Rock Hell festival in Wales. I freely admit to preferring the Alessio Garavello fronted incarnation of the band, indeed their excellent 'Black Society' album was one of the first reviews I ever submitted to this mighty tome. I felt that Garavello's more melodic vocal approach added much-needed dynamics to the material, yet I have to say that his successor Fabio Dessi is blessed with an almighty vocal roar that suits the Thrash-orientated nature of the bulk of their output.

However it's the sole original member and guiding light of Arthemis, Andy Martongelli, who is the true star here; his incendiary guitar histrionics are an absolute joy to behold. The rhythm section is a recent addition, though drummer Kekko and bassist JT add their excellent contributions as if they have been a part of the band since its inception.

Naturally, the selected material for a reasonably short set leans towards their more recent Dessi fronted output, including three songs from latest effort 'We Fight' ('Still Awake', 'Empire' and the title-track) and four from previous album 'Heroes' ('Scars On Scars, 'Home', '7 Days' and 'Vortex'), along with one 'oldie' from the aforementioned 'Black Society' (the rampaging 'Electri-Fire').

The sound quality is amazing and the band are tight (even though there is a little too much reliance on the "F - word" from Dessi); this is a decent souvenir of the show for long-standing Arthemis fans or anybody who attended, but I'm not convinced there is that much appeal for the casual listener.

Ant Heeks

ASIA – 'HIGH VOLTAGE' *(Frontiers)* Genre: Rock

When I was a kid, a fantastically gifted player joined my beloved Liverpool FC for a then record transfer fee. Of course I was delighted; and you say he's coming to a sports shop in Nottingham to sign photos? I waited for at least an hour, shuffling in line, to see the iconic sportsman. And as I looked down at him, beaming... he was picking his nose. I had been told that was rude. But he was doing it in public!

As you can see, it has stayed with me. This is why it's dangerous to create idols. Now, I adored Asia's first album, I still do, it's a sublime slice of Melodic Hard Rock with some off kilter moments (mainly Carl Palmer's eventful drumming) which elevates it to "classic" status. After fallings out and an extensive canon with John Payne in the driving seat, they came back

together and started to make pretty good new music. No happy ever after of course, Steve Howe has now quit to concentrate on Yes and they have a hip new string-slinger on board, but this set, from 2010 at the High Voltage Festival, showcases the original line-up.

It should be a celebration... it's almost a wake. This is mainly the well-known songs from that debut and while it can never live up to the pristine original, this is close to worrying. The sound is thin, levels jump hither and thither and the backing vocals are often out of tune; it's understood that John Wetton will be flattening notes but he does hit some big ones even if he does cut them short; we must consider the ravages of time. But the songs here are workaday, no event, which they certainly should be.

Some songs like 'Wildest Dreams' and 'Sole Survivor' shine through, with Palmer's drum solo on the former audacious as always, plus the newer songs like 'An Extraordinary Life' have a mid-pace sheen which suits their middle age meandering and the playing is delivered beautifully, as expected but always enjoyed. The crowd really like it and 'Time Again' and 'Cutting It Fine' almost have the swaggeringly grandiose groove of the debut; they unsurprisingly finish with 'Heat Of The Moment', for which the sound clears up and Howe's angular solo is a real treat. Generally though, this is a poor reproduction; perhaps the DVD will be better...

And it is a joy. Clear, concise at an hour, no bells and whistles, but that blissful band, that wonderful group. Wetton looking unsure as he sings (your heart going to him), Palmer happy and bouncy, Downes magisterial behind banks of keys and Howe, that crab like stance, peeling off extraordinary runs and challenging the audience, staring at them, bugging out his eyes and laughing happily.

We see Howe's concern during the backing vocals of 'One Step Closer', we see Wetton's love of Geoff Downes' beautiful keyboard work, we see a band who can still do it, frailty clear but love blossoming from that. And what's more, close ups; Palmer's feet, Howes's hands, moments not to be missed. The DVD may not answer all the questions that the CD asks, but it puts them in context and asks you to remember what a cut above they were.

Steve Swift

AUDIO NATION – 'WAIT IT OUT' *(Independent)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

On first listen you could be forgiven for thinking Audio Nation are from the Bayous of Louisiana. Steeped in American Country Blues Rock, this Icelandic quartet have a huge twang to their music and vocals that, like fellow Europeans The BossHoss or Volbeat, sound far removed from their station.

There's a strong Grunge influence on 'Wait It Out' too in their dark approach and as they utilise Alice In Chains' enchanting vocal melodies lead by Gisli Brynjar's deep voice that adds an authoritative tone that simmers with vulnerability.

What is refreshing to hear is a lack of urgency. For example, there are many times when possibly a lesser band would throw in some power chords to add "life" to a track. In contrast, AN stick to their slower tempo and let the stories and musicianship do the talking. The picked chords of 'Wonder Why' could so easily be replaced with forced Rock but instead the pace is dictated by the rhythm section; when the electric guitar comes out it's an excellently poised addition.

The exquisite execution of the title track and the magical darkness of 'My Grave' stand out above the rest in a show of mature song-writing. The solemn tones tread carefully without ever falling over into cynical sadness.

At times the addition of saxophone adds a nice layer but at others can be a total distraction and heads dangerously close to an Eric Roberts movie on Channel Five ('Feels Like Flying' and 'Humankind').

A clear philosophy has been laid out and strictly stuck to that adds a deep layer of authenticity. They may not be from the U.S. of A. but they've incorporated that into a sound of their own. Audio Nation do not need to wait for anything; they've arrived.

Dan Bond

BERNIE MARSDEN – 'SHINE' *(Provogue)* Genre: Blues/Soul

Best known as an original member of Whitesnake and co-writer of 'Here I Go Again', Bernie Marsden has had a long and illustrious career. With work alongside Cozy Powell, Paice Ashton and Lord, UFO and numerous others, he's also released a series of solo albums, the latest of which is 'Shine'.

Signed to the Provogue label, you could be forgiven for expecting a Blues album and a brilliant rendition of 'Linin' Track' would do nothing to change your mind. However, 'Shine' is an album full of surprises. 'Wedding Day' is a great old-school Blues Rock number with some glorious keyboards in the verse, while 'Walk Away' is a superb Pop-Rock gem, which shows Marsden to be an underrated singer and song-writer.

'Kinda Wish She Would' is a re-working of the Company Of Snakes track 'Kinda Wish You Would', which sees Marsden in full ZZ Top mode, with the guitar tone and style very close to that of Billy Gibbons. 'Ladyfriend' is a brilliant, harmonica driven, slow Blues number while 'Who Do We Think We Are?' is a beautiful, thought provoking tune with a John Lennon vibe.

The quality of Marsden's writing is augmented by some star guests joining in. There is a great new version of Whitesnake's 'Trouble' which has David Coverdale on vocals. It's an enjoyable take on a well loved song and Coverdale delivers it superbly, backed by Ian Paice on drums. Joe Bonamassa appears on the title track while keyboards are supplied by Don Airey.

There's an excellent rendition of Fleetwood Mac's 'Dragonfly' with Marsden once again selecting some wonderful guitar tones, while 'You Better Run' features some twin lead work reminiscent of what Marsden and Moody so famously did together.

There genuinely isn't a bad moment on this album, which contains Blues, Rock, Pop, instrumental tracks and guest appearances and still retains a cohesive sound. Anybody who is a fan of Bernie Marsden's past work will enjoy this, and any appreciator of good guitar based music would do well to check out this shining example of musicianship.

James Gaden

BETWEEN FALLS – 'INTIMATE GETAWAY' *(Independent)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

I can't say that Israel is really known for a particularly prolific Rock scene, so with Tel Aviv based Between Falls I was a little unsure what to expect, but also curious to see if their own unique cultural influences would impact the music here. 'Intimate Getaway' though owes its style and influences to classic nineties Grunge and Alternative Rock. The main twist they have though is in two distinctive vocalists, Grace Mogzamov and Simon Shocket. Most tracks feature one main lead singer rather than have an album packed full of duets, but the harmonies and backing vocals of equally strong male and female work well and compliment without disjointing the overall sound of the band.

'Love Me, Hate Me' is a typical Grunge laced opener, with Shocket taking on the vocal duties. Pearl Jam and in particular Audioslave are the main points of reference, even to the point of Shocket's voice bringing to mind similarities with Chris Cornell's powerful tone. 'Why' hands over to Mogzamov for the lead which has a bit more of a Progressive feel to it, bizarrely perhaps the phrasing and pitch of her vocals reminded me most of all of Jon Anderson during stages of the song, whilst guitarist and founder Victor Zi holds it all together with some impressive work.

And such stays the style for most of the album... which is where the downside begins. Shocket provides most of the heavier Rock tunes whilst Mogzamov's are the more complex and Progressive moments. 'Back to Hell' and 'Alive' are highlights, the change in vocals keeps some interest in the album, not knowing which direction the next track will take, but ultimately the overall strength of the songs isn't quite enough to keep you hooked for nearly an hour. Individually the songs are fine, variation and Progression abound, but not one of them really or totally blows you away or has the killers riff to stick in your mind long after the album has ended; which really is a bit of a shame. There's bags of potential and no little talent on display here, if they can up their game in the quality of material for album number two, then Between Falls could still be something special.

Ian Parry

ANATHEMA – 'DISTANT SATELLITES' *(Kscope)* Genre: Progressive

Liverpool's Anathema are the best kept secret in British music. A band who have quietly over the last five or six years, made some of the most timeless sounding albums released in the U.K. These CD's have enthralled and hypnotized anyone who has heard them, so it is a strange thing then, that Anathema aren't a name on everyone's lips and given the strength of their last few releases this defies logic. They are a band apart, creating sonic soundscapes that wash over you, using an ethereal paintbrush, dipped into a musical palate that sets the senses reeling as all beautiful music/art should.

'Distant Satellites' is their new album and it continues the band's journey and what Vincent, Daniel and Jamie Cavanagh, Lee and John Douglas and Daniel Cardoso have created on 'Distant…' is little short of perfection. Trying then to choose from this perfection is hard, so instead I'll just tell you about some of my favourites.

Opening the album with 'The Lost Song Parts 1 & 2' we find the band at first in an upbeat yet contemplative mood, with both Vincent Cavanagh and Lee Douglas vocals complementing not just each other but the all-encompassing orchestral refrains of the songs as they are played. 'Ariel' is a track that starts slowly with yet more wonderful plaintive vocals from them both , which helps the song to build, grow and flourish as it progresses, drawing the sweeping keyboards and intricate drum patterns of Cardoso and John Douglas in, until it finishes with a powerful dramatic crescendo. 'Anathema' sees the band playing to their strengths; strong complex melodies, gorgeous piano interludes and superlative vocals all vie for first place, as the track once again develops over its length.

Strangely, the band have also decided to thrown in a massive swerve to their music with 'You're Not Alone', 'Distant Satellites' and 'Take Shelter'. These songs see the band utilising dance and drum beats to drive the tracks forward. That they work with Anathema's Progressive style of music is tantamount to the song-writing quality, that they and this album offer the listener. However, as much as I like them, I can see many fans thinking that this might be a step too far for them to go. But don't let yourself be one of the detractors because these three songs are some of the strongest the band has recorded and it just shows another side, to their ever varying approach to music.

Beauty as they say is in the eye of the beholder or in this case the ear; and every time I get a chance to listen to something new from Anathema, I hear just that – beauty.

Ian Johnson

BLACK STATE HIGHWAY – 'BLACK STATE HIGHWAY' *(HNE/Cherry Red)* Genre: Hard Rock

Black State Highway are a new Female-Fronted, classically influenced Hard Rock band that originally formed in 2010 at the Brighton Institute Of Modern Music. This multi-national band consists of Latvian singer Liva Steinberga, Scottish bassist Gordon Duncan, Swedish guitarist Yonnis "Jon" Crampton, English guitarist Olie Trethewey and drummer Harry Bland.

Musically you can hear Classic Blues and Rock influences throughout the songs, but there's a contemporary slant to their sound as well. I thought of several loose comparisons early on but eventually one example kept coming to mind... a Female-Fronted Thunder (albeit with a heavier Blues influence and some Stoner fuzziness in places). They share a similar bouncing rhythm section and a Ben Matthews crunchy riffs/Luke Morley squealing lead type combination to their British counterparts, although the axe work is a touch heavier at times.

The self-titled debut kicks off with one of my highlights, 'Conclusion', which is built upon a groovy riff/sleazy lead pairing that pops up throughout the song. The chorus sees Steinberga's vocals delivered with attitude and even a bit of a scowl. This is swiftly followed by my second favourite, the single release 'Ain't Got No', it has a straight forward, Rocking progression, catchy chorus and some cool lead guitar work. It's one of the songs where the Thunder analogy really came to the fore.

Another that stood out is 'Tekkers' with its Funky churning progression in the verse before yet another infectious chorus and "orgasm-face pulling" solo. It's the second song that that wouldn't look out of place on a Thunder album. My last top pick is the album closer 'Trouble'; it's the most Classic Rock influenced song on the album and also probably the most up-tempo one. There's a runaway progression and scaling lead that's backed up by some memorable punchy vocals, especially in the chorus, by Steinberga. The album also includes the Bluesy Thunder-like ballad 'Broken', the Stoner and more modern 'Free' and 'Common Man' and lastly 'Sacrifice' with its chuntering riff that's so filthy even Cillit Bang and Barry

Scott couldn't clean it up.

As far as debuts go, this is a quality start from BSH. As I've often said of Thunder, they may not set the world alight or be anything breathtakingly new, but their music is always highly entertaining and well played to boot. Crampton and Trethewey can really shred and fire up some cracking progressions and solos whilst Steinberga has a solid voice that suits the music she's fronting; she sounds something along the lines of a young Julie Westlake or Lita Ford. If you like your Hard Rock to have a bit of variety, this is an excellent debut and a highway well worth travelling down.

Dave Scott

BLACK TRIP – 'GOIN' UNDER' *(Steamhammer/SPV)* Genre: Hard Rock

With Black Trip, we – Classic Rock fans – can feel lucky that music isn't really subjected to the rules of mathematics. If it was, the simple addition of former members of Swedish Death and Black Metal acts (Necophobic, Nifelheim) to the two current members of Enforcer (Heavy Metal) could have resulted in the mishmash of styles we'd hardly dig here at Fireworks. However, the result of this operation – which is BT's debut album – gravitates towards NWOBHM and 1970s Hard Rock rather than what we could have expected from a band which features two musicians from the extreme end of the Metal spectrum.

Although the album's title reads 'Goin' Under', it's the phrase "goin' back" that would have fitted this more appropriately. If you ever dreamt of travelling back in time, you might have just founded the appropriate vehicle. If you love the likes of Saxon, Thin Lizzy or Blue Öyster Cult, it's more than sure you're going to enjoy every minute of this journey forty years into the past. Tracks such as 'Voodoo Queen' or 'Tvar Dabla' sound literally like Lizzy on steroids (especially Joseph Tholl's vocals which sound like a more raspy version of Phil Lynott). 'No Tomorrow', on the other hand, shows the influence of Budgie and other early NWOBHM bands exerted into the band's sound. Another NWOBHM-infused song is 'The Bells', with its fast pace and rich lead guitar work – and in spite of its ballad-esque nature, even the emotionally-laden 'Thirst' surprises the listener with its raw, fiery instrumental interludes. The terminal stop in this journey back to the 1970s/early 1980s era is the eponymous Blues-infused track, its compelling changes of pace making it one of the record's highlights.

'Goin' Under' sounds exactly as if it had been an unearthed gem recorded in the late 1970s – and certainly, among this relatively short and concise compilation of songs there isn't a single track I'd call a filler. The band's vintage style, steeped heavily in the old-school traditions of Blues Rock and NWOBHM and combined with the excellent musicianship, results in a sound that couldn't be classed as cutting-edge... but does it have to be? If you still favour your early Saxon, Demon or Holocaust albums over anything else, but also have a soft spot for TL and BOC – buckle up and hold on tight, because this journey back over four decades is absolutely worthwhile.

Alexandra Mrozowska

BLUEDOG – 'SON OF A BEACH' *(Chance)* Genre: Country/Southern/Folk

Last issue I reviewed 'Southern Kicks', the latest record from German-based Southern Rock band Kickhunter. Hot on its heels comes this album from Bluedog, which is the side-project of Kickhunter's guitarist and principal song-writer Stefan Aurel.

A varied album of fifteen songs (twelve originals and three covers), 'Son Of A Beach' is a far cry from Aurel's day-job band. The material flits between a summery West Coast, lightweight Country Rock vibe that brings to mind The Mavericks, Steely Dan, early Eagles and Tom Petty and a sixties influenced Rock 'n' Roll style. 'Where Were You' (featuring backing vocals from ex-Bad Company man Robert Hart) is pure Rolling Stones, yet Bluedog's take on Jagger and Co.'s classic 'You Can't Always Get What You Want' is given the summery West Coast treatment – interesting but unlikely to topple the original. As for the other covers, you get a decent take on Beach Boy Dennis Wilson's 'Pacific Ocean Blues' while James Taylor's 'You've Got A Friend' is perked up with a full band backing.

It's a decent album that is well played, well sung and full of thoroughly enjoyable tunes, but I fear it's just a little too lightweight for the average Fireworks reader.

Ant Heeks

BLUES PILLS – 'BLUES PILLS' *(Nuclear Blast)* Genre: Blues/Soul

Hailing from Sweden, Blues Pills are a multi-national band, fronted by the quite extraordinary vocals of one Elin Larsson and boasting the talents of eighteen year old French guitarist Dorain Sorriaux along with Cory Berry on drums and Zack Anderson on bass (both from the U.S.A.).

'High Class Women', with its mass of rumbling rhythms, is taken apart with Larsson's banshee-like vocals. It's quite unbelievable how this young woman can sing like this at her tender age. Sorriaux's seductive guitar gives a smooth touch to this shining gem of a song before it climaxes in an untamed assault.

'Ain't No Change' displays a strong influence of early Fleetwood Mac and the tight interplay between the instruments is to be applauded. Larsson allows her voice to become a whisper as the guitar takes the lead role on this track. The Funky guitar of 'Jupiter' and the foxy vocal would not be out of place in a Russ Meyer movie in my opinion!

The one word that comes to mind with 'Black Smoke' is "beautiful" and it is sung from the heart, before guitars wash over everything in a gutsy, raw onslaught. 'No Hope Left For Me' (a real standout song) is a soulful slow burner with enough tragedy in the vocal delivery to touch even the most hardened soul.

'Devil Man' and 'Little Sun' will be familiar to anyone who has heard their previous EPs, and here they have been slightly rearranged without losing any of the live energy of the originals.

'Astralplane' borrows from FM's 'Albatross' during the quieter moments, yet still allows Sorriaux's free reign style to throw out some jaw dropping guitar licks.

Their blend of Funk (with a touch of Isley Brothers) is all over 'Gypsy' in its dynamic delivery; yet again containing Larsson's dazzling vocals, which elevate the song, reminding us why she is one of the most exciting female vocalists to come along for a long time.

This self-titled album has all the makings of a classic debut and it cannot be long before these guys are an international name in the Rock world.

Ray Paul

BODINROCKER – 'ROCK IT THE RIGHT WAY' *(Bearman Music)* Genre: Rock

Anders Bodin hails from Sweden, where he began writing and playing guitar at the tender age of ten. Influenced by Slade, The Beatles and especially Status Quo, they inspired him to become a serious musician during one of their shows in 1984.

Releasing his debut album 'Hall Of Flames' in 2006, Bodin continued to write and perform, eventually securing a support slot with the mighty Quo themselves! It's around this time that he started using the title Bodinrocker (which is Bodin's nickname) as the bands moniker.

The inspiration of Quo is evident throughout opening song 'Foreign Land', with its "heads-down" Boogie and it takes on the feel of some of their mid-eighties material.

'Long Way Round' is closer to something The Move might have released, with an authentic sixties feel. The West Coast Rock of 'Dreaming Away' owes a debt to Tom Petty and is a pleasant little tune. The end of the release has us heading back into reliable Boogie territory with 'The Race' and 'Space'.

As easy as it is to knock the Quo for being three chord wonders, no band really seems to be able to replicate their signature sound to any degree. Bodinrocker certainly puts in a good attempt, but ultimately the songs leave you wanting the real thing!

Ray Paul

BRIMSTONE COVEN – 'BRIMSTONE COVEN' *(Metal Blade)* Genre: Heavy Metal

Brimstone Coven was formed in the U.S.A. in 2011, with guitarist Corey Roth writing the first five songs that became their first album. Recruiting Andrew D'Cagna (bass), Justin Wood (drums), and "Big John" Williams (vocals) gave them "official band" status.

By the second album, titled simply 'II', Dan Hercules kept the drum stool warm for a spell before original drummer Wood returned. Now signed to Metal Blade Records the band unleash their third album, titled (imaginatively!) – 'Brimstone Coven'.

Influences of Pentagram and early Black Sabbath are apparent within opening track 'Cosmic Communion'. It's a moody piece with a slow turgid guitar riff, and is subdued in its delivery.

As each song bleeds into the next, we get 'Behold The Anunnaki' which never really gets out of first gear and lacks any real intent. Droning guitars lace 'The Black Door', a hypnotic blend of Hawkwind that almost bypasses your brain.

Brimstone Coven have clearly not taken the easy path of simply mimicking the first three Black Sabbath albums – here we have a focused attempt at "Cerebral Dark Rock". 'Blood On The Wall' is simple and accessible Doom, while 'Lord And Master' is so slow it makes Candlemass sound like Annihilator!

'The Séance' and 'We Are Forever' have a rebellious nature and reminds me of Witchfinder General. 'Hades Hymn' is little more than a church organ with some thunder and rain - more of an "effect" piece.

Its obvious Brimstone Coven has a clear idea of how they want to deliver their brand of Doom; it just may not be a brand that excites everyone.

Ray Paul

CAPTAIN BLACK BEARD – 'BEFORE PLASTIC' *(Dead End Exit)* Genre: Rock

Shiver me timbers me hearties, and set sail on the high seas in search of treasure with Captain Black Beard! Okay...enough of the pirate-talk already, this isn't the Pirate-Metal that the band's name implies; this is something far more palatable indeed.

Ensuring mass appeal, this quartet from the beautiful city of Stockholm have a sound

CHRIS BRAIDE – 'FIFTY DOLLAR PLANETS AND TWENTY CENT STARS' *(Cherry Red/Braide)* Genre: Rock

Never heard of Chris Braide?! No, neither had I until two weeks ago! Braide is a singer/song-writer/producer and multi-instrumentalist with a C.V. that makes for very impressive reading. Hailing from Cheshire, he now lives and works in Los Angeles and has worked alongside such names as Britney Spears, Christine Aguilera, Paloma Faith... to name but three (Did I really just mention those Pop Princesses in such a hallowed magazine as this? Oh dear, I could be in for the chop!! (Dodgy ground-Ed)). To bring some Rock credibility to the review, Braide cites Marc Bolan as a great influence; he has also worked alongside Glen Tillbrook and Chris Difford (Squeeze) and formed a partnership with Geoff Downes (Yes) in 2012, with whom he produced the highly rated, yet somewhat obscure album 'Pictures Of You'. This is all rather impressive, but does this, his third solo album, match up to his reputation?

It is the rather Bolan-esque named titled track which opens the album, and it's the only song that has a real Rock 'n' Roll swagger to it – it immediately reminded me of early Rolling Stones with a dash of Lou Reed and just a light sprinkling of Prince; a great start for sure! The remainder of the album is unashamedly a quintessential singer/song-writer album, but whilst it mainly sits comfortably in mid-tempo territory, it never becomes dull. Mainly acoustically driven throughout, Braide's vocals are a delight and very easy on the ears (by the way ladies, he's also easy on the eye... apparently). What impressed me the most though, was his vocal range; never straining, often beautiful, unpretentious and never afraid to flirt with a higher register, which he does so well. Even on the initial spin, every song feels like an old friend. The two out and out ballads 'Let Me Love You' and 'What It Does To Me' are exquisite, and both have resounding choruses with orchestration to match. 'This Is For The Girl', 'Fascinating' and 'It's Not Too Late' would excel (if they haven't done so already) on mainstream radio, while 'Beautiful' has an edge to it akin to Vega; Braide does, at times, sound a little like Nick Workman which is no bad thing. 'Sophia' has a Womack & Womack 'Teardrops' vibe that will certainly reel you in.

With every song a winner, 'Fifty Dollar Planets...' has, in the past fourteen days been mine and Mrs C's permanent in-car entertainment as we've been touring Menorca and it is already high on my list of favourites for 2014. Why not embrace your mellow side... as songs this good will grab you and never let you go... trust me!!

Dave Crompton

that has a modern feel akin to the likes of The Black Keys or Kings Of Leon (albeit with much better songs and lyrics that are actually intelligible!), yet the melodies of these potentially hit-making songs are straight out of the eighties.

'Before Plastic', CBB's sophomore album, begins with probably the two most straight forward and commercially accessible songs on offer, 'Please Come Home' and 'Somebody', featuring special guest guitar solos from ex-Kiss man Bruce Kulick on the former and fellow Swede Tommy Denander on the latter. 'New York City' picks up the pace with a frantic chugging riff, then 'Bad Girl' slows things down a little; a track very reminiscent of some of Kiss' slower output.

'Music Man' and the catchy 'Keep On Drivin" brings forth more of a groove-driven approach, 'Aiming For Love' is an energetically bouncy number with a big chorus that melds CBB's current and old-school styles perfectly, then 'Shout' is highly reminiscent of a certain L.A. Glam Rock band – the repetitive "Shout" chant during the chorus leaves you under no illusion as to who influenced it! 'Life's What You Make It' is another groove-laden number with a big Bluesy edge, 'Takin' You Out' a hard-driving Rocker with a big chorus, while closing track 'Listen Up' is part mournful ballad on the verses and part moody Rocker on the chorus. It's quite unusual and successfully avoids becoming the clichéd ballad that the intro hints at.

The hooks throughout aren't exactly instant and require several listens before you fully appreciate this particular Captain's wares, but it's worth the effort.

Ant Heeks

CIMINO – 'ANGELS & ANIMALS' *(Head First)* Genre: Hard Rock

This Kansas City quartet bring a hefty dose of paired down Rock 'n' Roll, delivered with volume and confidence but with the casual feel of a band enjoying themselves. 'Anarchy' opens Cimino's third album with raw, dirty riffs and 'Start All Over' quickly makes you think of early Alice In Chains or a less Punky Buckcherry. Cimino do, however, sometimes lack the final punch with the songs being a bit too long and losing their direction.

'Alive' takes on a different tone, one not really able to be defined by the term "ballad" due to its flowing pace, while Kyle Cimino's vocals continue to rasp and grind away as he shows off his range. It's worth noting too the skill of the other band members in singing the backing vocal harmonies.

'Fame' combines elements of recent Slash with Myles Kennedy; it's one of the better tracks being both catchy and tightly delivered. The guitar solo in 'Sick' seems to come in almost at the end of the song but the polyphonic texture makes it stand out from the other solos. 'Never' takes the tempo down again and while an emotive track, it becomes rather messy and monotonous; the melody especially lacking in range.

'Sexy Thang' is one of the heavier tracks and this sound suits the band well. The melody is punchy and staccato, providing a great contrast to the preceding track. 'Someday' is altogether brighter and more uplifting but still fairly heavy. Again, however, there is a tendency to drag the song out without adding any extra weight listening-wise. Closing track 'Shine' is rhythmic and in the same heavy vein but the melody is written along very few notes, causing little excitement to the listener.

Cimino have all the elements of a good, solid Rock album, but sometimes you struggle to remember the songs and they lack infectious quality.

Sophie Brownlee

CRUCIFIED BARBARA – 'IN THE RED' *(Despotz)* Genre: Hard Rock

In issue 53 I was handed the riotous third album from Crucified Barbara ('The Midnight Chase' which I concluded was "splendid") and I've been a fan of the band ever since. It's an album that I've played often and everyone I've recommended it to have been equally impressed.

Two years on, the all female, fearsome foursome from Sweden are back with their new album. For those that haven't come across CB before, their style is a Hard Rock/Heavy Metal hybrid with devastating riffs, concussion inducing rhythms and powerful, throaty vocals. I have seen them described as a mixture of Metallica, Motorhead and Joan Jett and to be fair I can't think of anything better myself.

'In The Red' refers to topping the levels when recording or using a mixing desk; it's certainly an apt title. I don't know about "red lining" but having listened to the album I am surprised they didn't blow up the whole bloody studio. The bands lyrical content can be every bit as hard hitting as their music with their latest single 'To Kill A Man' highlighting rape and domestic violence whilst 'The Ghost Inside' discusses the pressure in society to fit in and conform.

'...Red' hits terminal velocity right from the off with the furious guitar and shouty chorus of opener 'I Sell My Kids For Rock 'N' Roll'. 'Don't Call On Me' is another entry with frantic guitar work, although the catchy chorus takes its foot off the gas a little before a cracking solo. Elsewhere there is stomping rhythm and bellowed chorus of 'Finders Keepers', the glorious whining lead and melody of 'Do You Want Me' as well as the slower chug of the aforementioned single '...Man' where Mia 'Coldheart' Karlsson dials down the gravel in her choral vocals. My two absolute favourites are the "classic" sounding, revolving riff and infectious chorus of 'Electric Sky' and the Hard Rock based '...Inside'. The latter has another memorable chorus and some marvellous dual guitar.

As much as I loved '...Chase', '...Red' is an absolute barnstormer that sees CB jumping to a whole new level, one that also feels heavier overall due to incorporating a much "meatier" sound especially in the guitars; both Karlsson and Klara "Force" Ronnqvist Fors have conjured up a real maelstrom, while Karlsson's vocal roar has more velocity than ever. So far, my list of nominees for "Album Of 2014" consists mostly of Symphonic Metal offerings, but with this album Crucified Barbara have taken an "18 wheel juggernaut" and smashed through the walls to gate crash the party. If you like your Metal with real fire and fury, you won't find many better this year... 'In The Red' fecking Rocks big time!

Dave Scott

CJ WILDHEART – 'MABLE' *(Devilspit)* Genre: Hard Rock

If you've been following the recent exploits of the Wildhearts (and associated) men Ginger, 'Random' Jon Poole, Willie Dowling or Chris Catalyst, then you won't be surprised to know that this latest offshoot from one of the hearts of the wild, 'Mable', took shape under the guise of a Pledge campaign. CJ Wildheart is however possibly the most surprising of the exponents of the fan funded model, the guitarist and singer retreating completely from the music business until some recent guest slots on Ginger's releases and a spate of Wildhearts touring activity relit the flame.

So what has Ginger's perfect foil been up to in the meantime? Well, running and selling his own cleaning business, removing himself from the London rat-race, owning chickens (Mable being his favourite…) and creating Devilspit sauce, that is every bit as hot as its name suggests. Impressively, 'Mable' (the album!) is just as spicy as the lip-tingling creation that was also available through the Pledge campaign, as well as being as loving and giving as any favourite chicken could ever hope to be.

Basically working alone in his home studio, CJ enlisted the help of producer Lee Wray (a long-time musical partner) to form an album that slowly creeps up on you with smacks of Power-Pop goodness. First impressions are a little unspectacular, the effect being of a fuzzy memoried night out that you can't quite recount to your friends. You know you had fun, but what did you get up to…? Then, as the haze lifts, you begin to have the thundering drums of 'Down The Drain' reverberate around your head, the synthesized joy and hair raising riff of 'Better Late Than Never' "nah-nah-nahing" from your still burning lips, the staccato guitar and layered voice of 'D.C.' convulse through your entire body, before the cracking cover of 'Vitriol' (originally by BlueJuice) has you punching the air in joy and cavorting naked down the street shouting, "Mable, where are you?".

Welcome back CJ, it's been too long Sir. Thanks for the songs, the hooks and the "devilspitting" chickens.

Steven Reid

CONFUSION – 'TEMPTATION BLUES' *(Independent)* Genre: Hard Rock

Despite the name, there's not a lot of confusion surrounding this Swedish band's straightforward sound. Take the fuzzy, Bluesy riffs of ZZ Top, work that groove hard and you've got the backbone of Confusion's music. Add vocals that ape Jim Morrison (if he were a German) on 'Pay My Share' and 'Mainstream', adopt a more Rock 'n' Roll approach on 'Sweet Little Woman' and you've got a simple yet effective Blues band.

'Down The Drain' has the primal groove and the cartoon menace of George Thorogood And The Destroyers. This is heavier than standard Blues but not dark enough to be labelled Stoner. This four-piece, while they won't set arenas on fire, do a good enough job that they'd be able to burn your local pub to the ground on a Friday night gig. If you're looking for Nu-Blues and something adding a fresh spin on the Devil's music, this isn't it. This is fairly standard Blues Rock that won't surprise but does what it does competently.

In this digital age of expanded discs, nine tracks could be seen as being somewhat short-changed and despite being a Blues bunch at heart, they keep those songs fairly concise, not stretching the tunes out further than five minutes forty seconds. When they do solo a little longer on 'Some Things Are Given', it's no bad thing and perhaps they should do more of this in the future.

No excess musical frippery means straight up, basic, well-played Blues Rock; for Blues Rock fans it appears, ironically, that Confusion makes sense.

Duncan Jamieson

CROWN OF GLORY – 'KING FOR A DAY' *(Fastball)* Genre: Power Metal

Swiss misters Crown of Glory have been missing in action on the album front since their well received debut in 2008, but after six long years of hard concert work they've finally decided to give it another go. Power Metal to the hilt, they are six strapping young lads, half of whom could swap passports, so 'identikit Metal band' are they.

Regardless of how they may look, it all comes down to the music and COG certainly don't disappoint, not even a tiny bit. 'King For A Day' makes great use of the twin guitars and keyboard, playing around with power and melody in equal measure. It's all pretty dramatic stuff, varying between chest beating Metal ('The End Of The Line'), Power Metal ('One Fine Day') and Hard Melodic Rock ('The Hunter'). Hene Muther does himself proud on vocals, bringing a very Helloween-esque tint to many of the songs and helped out by some nicely produced backing vocals throughout. Add to this some intelligently used keyboards, the obligatory widdly guitar solos and pounding drums and you have an album that ticks all the right boxes.

Crown of Glory are certainly more Helloween than DragonForce, but have won me over with some very polished, melodic songs. 'King For A Day' is an album that will make you pray they don't wait another six years for the follow up.

Alan Holloway

CRYSTAL EYES – 'KILLER' *(Massacre)* Genre: Heavy Metal

It's been six years since their last release 'Chained' and changes to the line-up have seen the departure of lead vocalist Soren Nico Adamsen and the recruitment of guitarist Niclas Karlsson with sole original member, guitarist Mikael Dahl, taking over lead vocal duties for the first time in years.

The loss of a lead singer may well have been a blessing as Dahl's vocals are exceptional; both powerful and with an incredible range that would give Rob Halford and Bruce Dickinson a run for their money.

Judas Priest and Iron Maiden are decent reference points for Crystal Eyes, with the galloping bass lines and scything riffs along with melodic dual guitar solos bearing their influences proudly. Chuck in a touch of Manowar on the stand out track 'Hail The Fallen' with its rousing call to arms and you have one impressive album.

The punchy, clear production (mixing Fredrik Nordstrom and mastering Henrik Udd) enhances and emphasises the dynamics of the likes of 'Forgotten Realms' with its moody acoustic intro and rousing chorus while the Scorpions-esque 'Spotlight Rebel' adds a touch of commerciality into the mix.

With new albums out this year by Priest and Primal Fear, Crystal Eyes can certainly stand shoulder to shoulder with these titans in what is shaping up to be a vintage year for Heavy Metal.

Mick Burgess

DRAGONFORCE – 'MAXIMUM OVERLOAD' *(earMUSIC)* Genre: Power Metal

The main criticism aimed at AC/DC is that for thirty years they have put out the same album. While this is not exactly true, it does show that Acca Dacca stick to what they're good at and their die-hard fan base wouldn't have it any other way. In many ways this could be aimed at DragonForce too, whom have seldom strayed at all from their brand of scorching fury with Herman Li and Sam Totman's duelling lead guitars and blasting drums over their six album career.

But like the Aussie Hard Rock heroes, the style works perfectly and you would frankly be mad to expect anything different. So it comes as no surprise that DragonForce come out charging on new album 'Maximum Overload' with all the insane glory we have come to know and love from Britain's best Power Metal band.

Marc Hudson has well and truly settled in and with that DragonForce sound like their own band, not one that is trying to escape from their larger-than-life former front-man. Hudson's powerful and emotive voice shines just as brightly as ZP Theart ever did. First single 'The Game' opens things up with a huge hook (and guest vocals by Trivium's Matt Heafy) while 'Symphony Of The Night' and 'Defenders' ramp up the gloriously fast guitar playing and would fit easily among the very best of DragonForce's enviable canon.

The only venture away from their comfort zone is a cover of the immortal 'Ring Of Fire' by Johnny Cash. It speaks volumes that it was tacked on to the end; it's a step too far for both parties and leaves the record on a novelty low point. Shame because even if the album stayed at nine tracks rather than an even ten it would have benefitted. More than that, the 'Force proved they don't need to cover anybody, their superb song-writing doesn't need any help.

Dan Bond

CURVED AIR – 'NORTH STAR' *(Curved Air)* Genre: Progressive

Curved Air are perhaps best known for their 1971 hit single 'Back Street Luv', for "iconic" vocalist Sonja Kristina and for offering a mid-1970s drum stool to Kristina's later husband, Stewart Copeland. It's also easy to forget that the first three CA albums all breached the U.K. Top 20; there always was more to CA than 'Back Street Luv' (great track though it is).

'North Star' is the first CA album to feature significant lashings of new material since 1976's 'Airbourne'. Of the fourteen tracks wagging their tails here, seven are new, four are re-recordings of early CA or Kristina solo material and three are covers of tracks by The Police ('Spirits In The Material World'), Snow Patrol ('Chasing Cars') and The Beatles ('Across The Universe').

While it is true that only Kristina and drummer Florian Pilkington-Miksa remain from the original line-up, returning "classic-era" guitarist Kirby Gregory (who played with the band back in 1972-73) adds further authenticity. In addition, Chris Harris (bass), Robert Norton (keyboards) and Paul Sax (violin) have all been with the band for most of the period since the bands 2008 reformation, with Norton joining and Sax replacing original violin maestro and founding member Darryl Way in 2009.

The new material sounds surprisingly fresh, with Carl Glover's sleeve design giving the album a light, bright feel and a real lift. Rousing opener 'Stay Human' is masterful, capturing the essence of the band's Classical and Folk-infused Progressive Art-Rock, with Gregory and Sax on fire; ditto 'Images and Signs, 'Interplay' and the instrumental 'Spider'. In fact, the best of the new material easily eclipses the re-recordings and covers.

"And the people grow older" sings Kristina in 'Old Town News' and while that's evidently true of the assorted band members age-wise, musically the current incarnation of CA sound fresher and more vital than ever. There are tight band performances throughout, with Harris and Pilkington-Miksa selflessly creating a platform for the soloists and Norton adding warmth and drama at every turn.

The only point of concern, loathed as I am to admit it, is Kristina's voice itself. Fans will point to its enduringly ethereal qualities, though to these ears, occasionally here it sounds a little thin; nevertheless, that's a minor quibble. I'm sure existing fans will be delighted with what's on offer, while potential new fans could do far worse than follow the 'North Star'.

As I say, there always was more to this band than 'Back Street Luv', and clearly there still is. In remaining sensitive to the Curved Air sound and tipping its hat to the band's history, the mix of material on this album proves it.

Michael Anthony

DAMN PIGEON – 'RE-COOP' *(Independent)* Genre: Rock

The Canadian band Damn Pigeon haven't had an easy flight so far. Their first album 'Dismal Reviews' was actually better than the title suggested but their original singer, Steve Phillips, sadly passed away due to cancer shortly after the release of the record. After some time to get over his death, it was decided to return to the roost and new singer Doug Weir fits in well with a voice good enough to cope with the varied material DP cover. Essentially a Rock band, they mix up Classic Rock, Blues Rock and Modern Rock. When it's good it's great but when it's not, it's pretty run of the mill.

Opener 'I'm Down' is perhaps their best track, certainly one of the most immediate and is a good solid, Rootsy Rocker. 'Gift Horse' has a great Dixie riff and a hummable chorus. From there the record flits from one genre to another; 'If I Can't Have You' pleads convincingly, 'Who Cares?' hints at Led Zeppelin and 'Dead Man's Shoes' has a Bluesier edge. It takes a left turn with 'Asshole Lives' which is full of Modern Rock angst but has a fairly infectious chorus that makes you want to sing along. Elsewhere there are elements that are reminiscent of Jupiter Coyote that don't leave such a lasting impression.

It's not quite your healthy woodpigeon, this is more your grubby city dweller, a rodent with wings. However, at times it flies and can be recommended for those that like their Classic Rock mixed up with a touch of Americana and Modern Rock, but it needs more consistency in the song-writing if it's really going to make you coo.

Duncan Jamieson

DARKEST ERA – 'SEVERANCE' *(Code 7/Cruz Del Sur)* Genre: Heavy Metal

'Severance' births a journey of identity and uniqueness for Darkest Era. Compared to their previous release 'The Last Caress Of Light', where the album embraced other Celtic Folklore Metal bands, 'Severance' opens the door to DE's own distinctive sound.

Celtic Mythology themes flow through the veins of this album, capturing the darkness and emotion of sorrow for defying the Celtic strict morality with God like qualities to adventure and heroism. Combine this with their solid musical structure and you get an outstanding album that invokes a dreamlike, almost caught in a nightmare, atmosphere.

There is a collective of genres in their mix, giving their songs a real dynamic edge. The opening track 'Sorrow's Boundless Realm' takes on Death Metal aesthetics but is cleverly balanced with an old-school guitar assembly through chord progressions and harmonics in the solos. Vocalist Krum can perform an excellent array of vocal techniques, here you can slightly hear, as you can through the rest of the album, a similar style of Nick Holmes and Bruce Dickinson but still identifiable to Krum. He is able to adapt his tone and a different octave to perform the right feel for the tracks. 'Songs Of Gods And Men' brings forth Iron Maiden like characteristics, with a strong focus on guitar hooks and catchy lyrics; be ready to partake in the harmonic hymn like chorus.

'The Snake And The Shadow' really steps the mark up for Darkest Era. The twin guitar opening with Ade Mulgrew and Sarah Wieghell is incredibly tight, the former then takes the lead with one profound riff which is euphoric to the ear and not to mention a significant solo that any guitar fan would value.

The "Trademark" of album has to be their released single 'Beyond The Grey Veil'; it is a track that stands out from the rest and is the greatest representation of what this album is about both thematically and in terms of the grave musicianship of its creators.

Every piece on this record has been carefully thought through and placed - each song takes you on its own musical ride. There is a lot to be said about the showmanship from the very start to the very finish of this album and it's a treat for any muso's ear.

Lara Kisel

DARRYL WAY – 'CHILDREN OF THE COSMOS' *(Right Honourable)* Genre: Progressive

'Children Of The Cosmos' is a pleasant, pleasing and well-intentioned solo album from original Curved Air violinist and founder member Darryl Way. In fact, it's his first Rock album for over twenty years and, in inspiration both lyrically and musically, it stretches back further than that.

That's not to say that it's anachronistic or that Way has nothing to offer the present – but it does tie modern production and fresh songs to his late 1960s/early 1970s roots and is all the more interesting for it; in some ways it shows how little has changed. The issues that dominated youth culture back then have not gone away, and it's warming to hear Way placing his respect for the natural world and his musical past into a modern context.

The title track introduces some of the "hippy" themes that persist through the album and shows that Way has lost none of his spark, creativity or passion. Stand out tracks for me include the Eastern-tinged, name-dropping and generally Rocking 'Summer Of Love', the dreamy 'Lagan Love' (instrumental) and the classically-infused 'Sergey' (another instrumental), with Way's violin quite rightly centre stage and characteristically evocative. Also ear catching are the superb vocal performance of Rosie (surname not supplied) on 'Fire With Fire', the beautiful melody of 'A Winter's Tale' and the integration of 'Pachelbel's Canon' with the Cod Reggae rhythms of 'Don't Look Back'. Less appealing (to me) are the atypical sounds of 'Spooks', which are more New Wavey than New Agey and just feel a bit out of place.

There's some lovely music here. 'Children Of The Cosmos' is a gentle album that's easy on the ear. It won't Rock hard enough to please all Fireworks readers, but it will doubtless please Curved Air and Darryl Way fans, and anyone else who wants to dip back into the roots of Prog Rock and British Psychedelia while keeping one foot in the present and one eye on the future.

Michael Anthony

DEVIN WILLIAMS – 'DESTRUCTION OF KINGS' *(ASCAP)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

'Destruction Of Kings' is the new release by Christian Rock artist Devin Williams. While Williams says that the album is "for anyone who has ever felt…the lack or presence of a spiritual driven life" it is easy to listen to the talent of this unsigned artist without any religious overtones.

Opening title track has hints of Myles Kennedy style vocals and the Rock sound is simple yet tight, the main focus being on William's vocals. 'Like A Fire' is a bit heavier, but these tracks don't hang together so well over the whole album length as the vocal melodies are often too similar across tracks. The exception could be 'Feel You Falling', with its more rhythmic and sparse guitars, but the vocals still cover a very limited range of notes, ending up with the same tone again.

The slower 'Here For You' is the type of song that helps to try and bring the album together; there's more of a melody and a greater show of song-writing too. 'People Watching' is the highlight track; more energetic and more light-hearted, it contrasts a fast verse and a slower chorus well without breaking the rhythm of the song.

'Greater Than Fame' has creative song-writing, exploring materialism in its lyrics, but I feel Williams could add more depth to the song in his vocal delivery. Closing track 'Destiny' returns to the heavy style of the first few songs, which is welcome after the previously softer songs. The rhythm feels a little stilted though the pace in the bridge after the chorus feels a lot more comfortable for the song. Again, Williams's voice doesn't seem to quite suit the tone of the song, which this time contains some edgier guitars.

Overall, this is a competent album with a laid-back tone throughout the second half and a heavier style in the first. However, it often also feels bland and lacking in personality where the vocal performance can be lacking at times too. Overall, nothing to blow you away.

Sophie Brownlee

DIAMOND LANE – 'TERRORIZER' *(Independent)* Genre: Hard Rock

A Hard-Rocking Los Angeles quintet, Diamond Lane has released their third album, 'Terrorizer', following on from 2011's 'World Without Heroes' debut and 2013's mini-album 'Sapphire'. Though they look like relics of the NWOBHM scene, DL sit comfortably in the seventies and eighties Classic Rock groove, while also staying true to the current Metal scene

ELECTRIC RIVER – 'THE FAITH & PATIENCE' *(Cadiz)* Genre: Rock

After impressing the U.K. touring with Lit in May, Electric River have finally released an album and it is one to be proud of. The Kent four-piece have been getting plenty of positive notices for 'The Faith & Patience', and after listening to it several times I'm afraid I'm going to have to join in with the general ass kissing.

From the off, with opener 'Calling Out', it's impossible to listen to Chris Aldis' guitar and not think of The Edge from U2. This could have made ER a bit dodgy because no one really wants another U2 (we've only just got rid of the last one) but as soon as vocalist Alex Mayland joins in, it's another sound altogether. His rough, Punkish style takes the smooth backing music and kicks it about a bit, so you get more of a Kings Of Leon feel.

With all this said, there's plenty of original spark about ER. They straddle the genres of Punk, Indie and Rock equally and have produced some great songs full of life and vigour. 'Hold Your Nerve', for example, is just the sort of powerful, guitar fuelled Indie track that the British public loves to embrace and send to the top of the charts. The thing is, the album is pretty much stuffed full of tracks that would suit the same description, with more rough diamonds than a Guy Ritchie film.

Electric River are a band whose music will fill you with energy; with cool guitars, angry vocals and some excellent melody throughout. With nods to Classic Rock, Indie and Punk, they've managed to pull together the best parts of all three to create something fresh and vibrant. Catch them while you can, because when the Muggles get hold of them, they're gonna be big stars.

Alan Holloway

with the occasional meaty down-tuned riff.

The first thing that is apparent is for an independent release, the production is outstanding – crystal clear yet solid enough to reveal the shudderingly solid bass grooves that strut throughout the material on offer, while also capturing the in-your-face energy of the band. This in turn allows itself to reveal everything DL have to offer; all scything guitar riffs and squealing solos, thunderous drumming and impossibly tight bass, while all the time confirming that the song is still king, as each and every song on this nine track offering is chock-full of killer hooks and melodies.

It's straight–forward Heavy Rock that periodically veers into Metal territory while also displaying a whiff of Grunginess and the odd penchant for a Progressive twist or two. I hear numerous influences scattered throughout, including Avenged Sevenfold, Iron Maiden, Metallica, Alice In Chains, W.A.S.P., AC/DC (or indeed Airbourne), Saxon, The Treatment and, strangely, The Darkness amongst others. Front-man Brandon Baumann has a somewhat off-the-wall style that occasionally ascends into screams, but it all seems to work on the harder Rocking numbers, yet he manages to rein his style in with a very classy showing on the closing ballad 'Drift', which is vaguely reminiscent of Whitesnake.

There's definitely nothing new to be had here but it's great fun to listen to, which obviously is the most important thing of all.

Ant Heeks

DIARIES OF A HERO – 'DIARIES OF A HERO' *(DustOnTheTracks)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

'Diaries Of A Hero' is the self-titled second album from this four-piece London based Rock band of the same name. In it, they combine a Modern Pop/Rock sound with screaming, rage-encrusted vocals. It could be along the lines of Black Veil Brides or Falling In Reverse, except that the raw Rock sound in it oozes that bit more easily and that bit more loudly.

The 'Intro' is almost uplifting, contrasting well with the sudden onslaught of guitars into 'Solitude'. It's a very modern style of Rock; clear-cut, especially regarding the vocals, and polished, but that doesn't stop you wanting to crank up the volume.

There's a similarity between all the songs, especially in terms of riffs and hooks; sometimes it can get a bit samey but that doesn't stop them from being catchy. Vocalist Carlo Del Favero uses good range in his singing, especially in 'J5'. The heavier 'Throne' relies on the drums in the verses and it's good to hear a sound paired down so much yet still packing such a punch. 'High School Funeral' is a little crazier with more screaming over singing; you can just see the band jumping about at a live show.

Closing track 'Brother' has a touch of the inevitable about it; just when you thought you knew this band, they add another dimension in veiled, haunting vocals. The rhythm is slower but it rages just as hard. The soft bridges feel like a steady build-up, respite even, to the full power of the band unleashed in the chorus. If a band can show emotion and personality through distortion and harsh-edged vocals, it's these guys.

This album will appeal more to those who like the blend of screamo vocals and singing but the emphasis is on the word "more" The balance of the two styles is delicate but works and the more I listened, the more I liked it.

Sophie Brownlee

DIRTY DIAMONDS – 'LET'S GET LOUD' *(Code 7/Vanity)* Genre: Hard Rock

My heart sank when I saw I'd been assigned to review the debut album 'Let's Get Loud' from Ireland's Dirty Diamonds; I really felt like I'd pulled the short straw and I was dreading giving it a listen. The band's debut EP was universally panned across the board in the music press; we're not talking just negative reviews, we're talking really harsh criticisms of every aspect of the band and its music. There have been some dramatic changes in the bands personnel since then, which includes band leader Jonathan Ryan changing his role in the band from drummer to lead vocalist. Ryan has stated following comments made about them by respected music journalists, that he took a long hard look at the band and its music and took onboard and assessed the criticisms and aimed to bounce back with a far better showcase of his songs.

Well it seems that DD have taken a big leap forward as '...Loud' is nothing like I was expecting. It's not perfect, but for what it is it is a very enjoyable and a pretty good overall collection of songs. It has a very old-school British Heavy Metal feel, you know fist pumping, gang style choruses with a strong sense of melody. You do hear their love of Classic Metal in there but I do think they have a smoother polish and slightly more melodic sheen than the bands that inspired them. A couple of tracks make me think of early Judas Priest and in others the raw Rock 'n' Roll of early The Almighty.

I am highly curious as to why Ryan was never always the vocalist because judged on his performances on this album, his bombastic booming vocal style is a perfect fit for this style of gutsy Rock 'n' Roll attitude. The impassioned Melodic Rocker 'Want You To Want Me' is probably one of my favourites and probably the smoothest track here, but it's the ballsy shout it loud Rock 'n' Roll of 'Goin' Down', 'Last Chance For Love', 'Crash And Burn' and 'Hell Or Highwater' that will really excite listeners.

Ryan is obviously very passionate about his songs and it's pleasing to hear him and his bands mates get it right this time around. Sometimes passion is not enough to craft quality music, but sometimes hard work and dedication does pay off! 'Let's Get Loud' isn't going to win any awards but the average fan of balls out Melodic Rock should really enjoy its dirty rambunctious Rock 'n' Roll swagger. You're going to need your denim and leather ready for when you play this, a shed load of denim actually and probably a mullet.

Paul Woodward

DIRTY LIONS – 'RAW' *(Independent)* Genre: Rock

I think the debut album from British Rockers Dirty Lions is aptly named as there is something innately raw about it. Dirty Lions started life as a vehicle for vocalist Michelle Jimenez-Alder and Medicine Hat's Mark "Dusty" Wright before they enlisted lead guitarist Ken Day and Medicine Hat's rhythm section of Garry "Jim" Bowler (drums) and Laurie Dalziel (bass) to complete their line-up.

It is very hard to pigeonhole them musically as they do mix it up a little bit in the structure and flow of their songs. In essence though DL are a laid back Rhythm And Blues band who could have very easily stepped out of the early seventies era of American Blues infused Rock music. 'Raw' though does add some less than straight forward touches to it that Blues fans may be unused to, like some Rap style vocals and Funky bass lines on 'Tiger' for example.

I've been listening to a lot of female singers lately and most of it has been really good, but most importantly the variation in styles has been very exciting for me as a listener. Alder is from the Janis Joplin school of Classic Rock with big powerful vocals. Her voice is really sultry and seductive, there's something intensely sexual about her vocal style. She was definitely born to sing the Blues and whilst Joplin is the obvious famous comparison, on one song I hear a slight Gwen Stefani vibe and on others I get a Amy Winehouse feel – it all depends on the nature of the song as like I previously stated, this isn't a straight Blues album; they have mixed up their influences and spiced it up a bit.

Wright and Day's guitar playing owes a lot to those famous African American Blues guitarist's of the fifties and sixties. Their style is very simplistic and laid back but highly effective in its rawness. I feel it's an album best enjoyed in its entirety so you can fully appreciate the ebbs and flows of the various feelings of each individual song. The most commercial songs open the album in 'Counting The Lines' and 'Rollercoaster' but the song order does have a live set-list order to it and I can imagine this going down well in a smoky bar room with people tapping their tables.

This album may not be for everyone it is very laid back and Blues Roots heavy but it is an enjoyable and well crafted collection of songs superbly performed by some very talented musicians so is sure to be popular with the fans of the Blues and Classic Rock bands in general from the seventies era.

Paul Woodward

DIVIDED WE FALL – 'DREAMCRUSHER' *(Independent)* Genre: Symphonic Metal

When I was sent this promo and told it was a Symphonic Metal band I wondered if it was going to be yet another disappointing band-wagon jumping bunch of musicians who have yet to master the dynamics and Progressive song structures that mark out a truly talented band of the genre. Regarding the band photo, they struck me as a bunch of uncool kids who have shuffled out of a geek-filled college, turned up at a gig and been told the band hadn't shown up so was there anyone in the audience who could play or sing?

As happens from time to time there was no info provided for this band so I had to do a lot of digging, and I discovered that they're an English Gothic Metal band from Stafford. Considering they've covered Within Temptation's 'The Howling' (not a bad effort) and Nightwish's 'Amaranth' (very brave of them!) in the past, their influences straddle the Symphonic/Gothic genre, but what impresses me is how influenced by Delain the band are. Vocalist Philippa (Pippa) Ricketts has moulded her mid-range soprano singing style on Charlotte Wessels with plenty of elongated phrasing and rise and full of vocal lines. Keyboard player and co-producer of this independent release Lee Mulcahy indulges in plenty of grandiose orchestral programming so beloved of Martijn Westerholt and does a first class job.

Guitarist/fellow co-producer Matthew Nicholls shows plenty of restraint, like the hired guns in Delain, and rhythm section bassist Aaron Pointon and drummer Tom Walker are the glue keeping everything tightly knitted together like your favourite Airfix model. Regarding Walker, he sounds amazing with his intense double bass drumming and perfect timing with the fluidity of his sticks and his hard hitting style. He probably plays to a click but hopefully a lot of the double bass drumming isn't programmed.

With the energetic title track 'Dreamcrusher', the melancholic undercurrent of 'Haunted' and the piano-led semi-ballad 'Dream My Life Away' they have songs that will appeal to fans of this genre. The very Delain-like 'This Ship Has Sailed' and 'Escaping Wonderland' along with the melodic 'Fight For Love' show that learning from the best has helped their development. For me, best song honours has to go with 'Until I Win'. I believe Ricketts has dueted with the Operatic Aonia singer Melissa Adams and from the orchestral intro and double bass drumming to the great chorus where Ricketts and Adams really find their range; it's quite simply a very good song.

Divided We Fall have everything in place to become one of the leading Symphonic/Gothic Metal bands in England so it will be interesting to see how they kick on from creating such a good and enjoyable album as this.

Carl Buxton

DOWNLOAD – 'ELEVEN STAGES' *(Sonic Revolution)* Genre: Heavy Metal

Andy Portmann has been around the Swiss music scene for quite a while now. He provided backing vocals for Krokus back in the nineties and has also being involved in engineering/producing along with a couple of solo and band projects leading up to this, his

latest band Download. A couple of years in the making seem well spent as 'Eleven Stages' is unquestionably the highlight of his career to date. A combination of Classic Rock and Heavy Metal influences, the album is also packed with haunting rhythms, powerful riffs and some delightfully memorable and melodic choruses that are made for Rock airplay.

'The Release' is a forty second intro, piano picking out the tune with haunting, distorted vocal before the powerhouse guitars of 'Run' blast in. If Portmann was looking to make an early statement of his vocal talents, 'Run' provides it in great style. Quiet tuneful verse underpinned by a predominately bass and drum riff leads to a full on chorus with guitars and vocals that smack straight between the eyes with both power and precision. 'Soul In A Bottle' is of a similar construction with a mid-paced verse building to a huge chorus.

Traditional Swiss Rock influences are buried in the overall sound with 'It's Rising' reminiscent of the early power of Shakra and 'With You In My Life' a delightfully orchestrated ballad full of piano and strings in classic Gotthard style. But underpinning it all, the band does develop a strong and cohesive sound. Portmann's vocals are clear, full of passion and just the right amount of oomph when he lets rip with a scream as powerful as anyone around – which he does sparingly to great effect.

'Stronger' is a full on Rocker whilst still keeping the melody flowing with some subtly placed keyboard harmonies and some outstanding guitar interplay; there's a classic lead duel between Hef Hafliger and Guido Strassman. My highlight of the album though is 'The Last Time I'll Hear Music', opening with possibly the heaviest riff of the album yet developing to the most memorable and catchy chorus, swiftly followed by 'My Strange Illusions' which maintains the power melody style.

I'm not familiar with Andy Portmann's back catalogue, but in 'Eleven Stages' he's produced a seriously strong album. Clear, crisp production, full of great individual performances and packed with tunes that combine power and melody with no little style, on top of guitar based metal substance. Well worth a listen...

Ian Parry

EDGE OF THORNS – 'INSOMNIA' *(Killer Metal)* Genre: Power Metal

A traditional Power Metal quintet hailing from Bitburg in Germany, Edge Of Thorns have been kicking around the lower reaches of the European Metal scene for the best part of two decades now.

Pitched somewhere between Rage, Grave Digger, Gamma Ray, Iron Savior and Accept (all blistering riffs, strafing solos and gravelly vocals), they released their debut 'Ravenland' about a decade ago, following that up some three years later with the rather clumsily titled 'Masquerading Of The Wicked'. Now, after a protracted seven year gap a revamped incarnation of EOT is back with album number three, 'Insomnia'.

Much like its more ostentatious cousin, Symphonic Power Metal, the Trad Power Metal market has suffered from an over saturation of bands for far too long now, the demarcation lines between one band and the next becoming ever more blurred until (broadly speaking) everything sounds the same. That's not to say there aren't some competent musicians and acts out there, it's just that most lack the defining edge to make them stand out from the crowd and thus progress to the next level. To a certain extent that accusation could be levelled at EOT, but after persevering with 'Insomnia' for half a dozen spins, there's a certain 'something' about them that elevates them from the masses.

For starters they're extremely competent musicians – guitarists Dave Brixius and Jani Nackel especially inject a ribald fluidity that immediately impresses. Granted, the throaty growl of front-man Dirk Schmitt may not be to everyone's tastes, but having grown up with the likes of Udo Dirkschneider, Chris Boltendahl and Peavy Wagner, that kind of delivery style will work perfectly well for most serious Metal fans.

As for the songs, well… dare I say that they've come up with their most consistently impressive offering yet? After setting an atmosphere of sorts with admittedly twee intro piece 'In Your Dreams' (all twenty odd seconds of it!), Edge Of Thorns roar into life with the thunderous 'Dark Side Of Your Life' (think Grave Digger meets Helloween). Other highlights include the title track itself which injects a Metal Church styled sense of malevolence into a raging inferno of riffs, the smouldering 'The Watchmaker' and the epic Accept-like 'A Caress Of Souls'.

Surprisingly sophisticated yet firmly rooted in the German Metal scene of the early 1980s, 'Insomnia' will certainly blow away the cobwebs!

Dave Cockett

ENFARCE – 'SUPERHERO DIARIES – PART 1' *(Independent)* Genre: Power Metal

This is somewhat of a resurgence for Enfarce having originally surfaced as Enforce in 2001 with two EPs in 2002 and 2004. Either way, what a name and will there be a second time for Enfarce? On this evidence, they may well have several chances. This Finnish foray nominally offer Power Metal in the way of Helloween, Gamma Ray and Edguy that they say they do, but there's more going on than that. Ricky Tournee has a real Metal belt (not the type that keeps his leather trousers up) and as the songs progress, they lift their skirts and give a glimpse of their style, a little Hard Rock here, a touch of Melodic Rock there, even a little AOR.

And so 'I'm A Hero' and 'Gift Of Prophecy' give us the double kicks, twinkling synths and attacking riffs that you expect and it's all done well, but they lead out with more of a Hard Rock considered feel. 'Redeemer From The Stars' has all the signifiers too, all jammed together but given air and a commercial sheen which shouts "oy, give us a chance!" and 'All Hope Is Lost' then seals the deal with a pristine example of the genre.

But 'Dawn Damage' beautifully confounds. It wheels in an organ and a Bluesy basis to tickle us with Classic Rock, soulful vocals and all, memorable melodies; it all works so well. 'Delusions Of Reality' tries this too, a softer side emerging through smoky guitars but mashing together a Power chorus but not entirely successfully.

Saddled with a silly science fiction concept (an inhuman superhero, Steel Enforcer who succumbs to earthly challenges) and seen as a cartoon band on their publicity, this has some hallmarks of people furiously having a good time and calls on some guitarist friends (Matias Kupiainen – Stratovarious and Francesco Fareri – Virtual Mind) to bulk out the appeal which you won't need; the music will do that all on its own.

Steve Swift

ENKELINATION – 'TEARS OF LUST' *(Independent)* Genre: Symphonic Metal

Diaphanous fabrics flowing amidst a hefty zephyr and attached to the limbs of a scantily clad female is the aural painting that always seems to result from listening to a Female-Fronted, Gothic Heavy Metal band.

Not to disappoint, 'Tears of Lust' embraces that very notion and is the debut release from one such newcomer to the scene, enkElination (derived from the Finnish word 'enkeli' which means "angel"). The album features all that is to be expected for the style; a heavy foundation, copious amounts of keyboards and Operatic vocals delivered with dark and forlorn undertones.

Being an ex-Opera singer herself, vocalist Elina Siirala's technique is world-class and performs the songs with both drama and precision. While the Progressive tendencies that often accompany this genre sometimes impede the flow of an otherwise graceful song, enkElination provide a much more straightforward and accessible album, delivering a brand of Gothic Heavy Metal that is both memorable and easily digestible.

Although a concept album it is not, the album's strength lies in its cohesiveness as a whole rather than a collection of disparate songs. Notwithstanding the value of an album that clocks in at close to one hour, the album length is a bit overbearing and would have benefited if it were shortened by two or three songs. However, the album flow is nicely done, as the songs segue well and establish a pleasant continuity. Fans of Within Temptation, and Stream Of Passion should be the first (among many) to thoroughly endorse this album.

Brent Rusche

ETTA ZERO – 'THE LAST OF ALL SUNSETS' *(Dr. Music)* Genre: Hard Rock

Liechtenstein would never be regarded as a hotbed for Rock music talent so it was with some trepidation that I slipped this album into the player. Etta Zero's evolution began in 2000, when they were known as Downfall and primarily covering Pop songs (with a Rock format) but developing enough to write some of their own material. The band changed their name in October 2010 and started to record their debut album, finally completing the tracks at the end of 2012. By utilising both guitars and electro elements there is a degree of uniqueness about the sound, though it has been heard before, and after several spins there is certainly much to appreciate.

I do like the combination of big riffs and techno synth textures in the opening title track, similar in some ways to the 'Underground Universe' by Finnish band Renegade Five that surfaced five or six years ago. Mathias Nutt's vocals lack a little range and power but I've heard many worse singers during recent reviews; in fact all the way through the vocals remind me of someone else and even now I still can't bring anyone to mind. 'Sorrow' is a great Melodic Rock song with a memorable hook, powered by some hard hitting guitars and keyboards lifted straight from an AOR record. 'All That I See' has another meaty riff and is contrasted nicely by some understated keys and by this time I was warming to the vocals. 'From The Ashes' is an up-tempo heads down Rock track and features an anthemic "fists in the air" hook. The song breaks down to a Pretty Maids style bridge and everything is once again under-pinned by some stabbing synths that add to the arrangement rather than intruding. 'Heartbeats' is apparently a cover of a song by a Swedish Pop duo called The Knife and acts as a link to Etta Zero's origins as a synth-based Pop cover band. The lengthy 'Heaven Is Closer' brings the album to a conclusion and is in-effect a ten minute summarization of everything that has gone before. A Black Sabbath sized riff gets the song underway before the "pinker" and "fluffier" melodies kick in. There are some distinctly Abba-esque mid-section orchestrated keyboards before the breakdown into some starkly reflective piano passages.

'The Last Of All Sunsets' is by no means Progressive but there is plenty going on musically to keep interest levels high. It is certainly an album that I will return to on a regular basis

FOZZY – 'DO YOU WANNA START A WAR?' *(Century Media)* Genre: Hard Rock

Since making the transition from joke covers band to serious Metal outfit with their first all original album 'All That Remains', Fozzy have seen each album improve upon the last. 'Chasing The Grail' was a powerhouse effort, and after a live album they issued the incredible 'Sin And Bones' which showed the band as masters of Metal aggression fused with Classic Rock riffs with a penchant for melody and hook laden choruses.

'Do You Wanna Start A War?' is yet another step in the evolution of the band. The rousing title track boasts a classic Fozzy riff from Rich Ward while charismatic vocalist Chris Jericho leads the call. 'Bad Tattoo' has a grinding verse before the double-kick driven chorus and single 'Lights Go Out' all fit what you'd expect from Fozzy. However, like all good bands, they are prepared to grow and spread their wings. 'Died With You' is a powerful ballad and 'Tonight' (featuring a guest appearance from Steel Panther's Michael Starr) is more in the vein of Fozzy's most popular cover, the Krokus track 'Eat The Rich' with a feel good chorus that is bound to go down a storm live.

For those who like Fozzy at their most breakneck, 'Brides Of Fire' will suit while 'One Crazed Anarchist' sees Jericho soaring over a massive riff, juxtaposed against some growls from Ward. 'Unstoppable' sees another first for Fozzy, with the entire song sung in unison by Jericho and guest vocalist Christie Cook. The duet works superbly and the lyrics about stepping up in the face of adversity are inspirational.

The track which took me most by surprise however, was 'SOS'. I know Fozzy started as a covers band, but this Hard Rock take on ABBA's track is absolutely top drawer. Jericho delivers probably his best vocal to date and the arrangement is perfect – unquestionably Hard Rock in its approach but also instantly recognisible as ABBA's song. This left field but brilliant choice of cover version compliments the decision to turn a few corners musically, marking it out as the album's highpoint for me.

It took me a few listens to truly appreciate 'Do You Wanna Start A War?' but now I know it, I love it. I'd have instantly named it Fozzy's best album had it not been issued in the shadow of the magnificent '…Bones' – however, every time I play this, I like it more, so in time I may well revise that opinion. The added diversity makes it a grower, but well worth investing your time into!

James Gaden

and if you have a penchant for something that is high calibre Melodic Rock, but with a contemporary techno edge, then this ticks many boxes.

Dave Bott

FAHRAN – 'CHASING HOURS' *(Independent)* Genre: Hard Rock

At a time when a lot of young British talent is struggling to match the popularity of their American counterparts, Yorkshire-based Melodic Metallers Fahran might have a tough task on their hands but have gone about things the right way by financing this sophomore release through the pledging of fans. Since their debut album, new bassist Josh Ballantyne has come in to replace the departed Alex Stroud and Nick Whitecroft's vocal parts have been taken over by ex-Invisible Idols and Serpentine singer Matt Black, joining founding drummer JR Windsor and guitarists Chris Byrne and Jake Graham.

The band has a powerful sound that pairs the twin guitar parts and galloping rhythms of Iron Maiden or Queensryche with contemporary song-writing that hints at the lighter side of Avenged Sevenfold or Shinedown, and at their most mid-paced, Nickelback and Black Stone Cherry. When they're not riffing and soloing like there's no tomorrow, guitarist Graham writes most of the music and his counterpart Byrne the lyrics (along with their former singer), the standard here being uniformly high and quite varied.

Highlights are many, with the adrenaline-fuelled opening salvo of 'Long Gone', 'Take This City Alive' and the explosive 'A Thousand Nights' all racing by in a flurry of sinewy guitar riffs, thundering drums, lively bass runs and the stratospheric and melodic vocals of Black; not to mention the tuneful backing vocals on the memorable choruses. Similarly 'Some Kind Of Family', 'Are We Free' and 'Cased In Steel' all Rock out with the same attention to melody, whilst slow burners like the title track and 'Back To Me' display a maturity that belies their short time together. The song-writing gets a bit more eclectic towards the end and 'I Heard A Joke Once' has original ideas and the potential to cross over into other genres, the combination of Black's skilled and enthusiastic delivery and some superb guitar solos raising the band above many of their peers.

The two guitarists also handle the production, with Graham also responsible for recording, mixing and mastering, and he's done a fine job too; maybe not up to the standards of a really good producer, but certainly good enough to not let the whole package down. Up to now Fahran don't seem to be getting the plaudits that bands like The Treatment and Night By Night are, but make no mistake, this band are up there in the top tier of what the U.K. has to offer.

Phil Ashcroft

FAITHSEDGE – 'THE ANSWER OF INSANITY' *(Scarlet)* Genre: Hard Rock

Well, this isn't bad at all. The second album from this California band, formed by Giancarlo Floridia and Ice-T/George Clinton/Alice Cooper bassist Fabrizio Grossi, with soon to be eponymous keyboardist Eric Ragno, has some nice moments and if it isn't great, it's perfectly enjoyable.

On the good/almost very good side, there's the contained attack of 'Now I Know The Truth', the toughness leavened by the melody of Alex De Rosso's solo, the big, bashing 'The Way I Have To Let You Go' with its heaving riff and an aching, warm solo which touches greatness and a feel of 'Get The Funk Out' in the bass of 'Revolve My World'.

On the 'only okay' side, 'Pray For This' is Alter Abridged, off the peg but growing to some Sleazier success, 'Comes Crashing Down' is only AOR with a Skunk Anansie ballad bit and the New Wave angst of 'Until Your Home' is misconceived. But then 'When I Lost You' shows a tight chorus redolent of David Reece's last album as a solo widdles about a bit.

No, it ain't all great, the mix is trebly and some tracks don't excite, but it has allure, is enjoyable and isn't half a trier. Whether that's enough to make to check out its charms is your choice. Isn't capitalism great?

Steve Swift

FALSE CODA – 'CLOSER TO THE EDGE' *(Steel Gallery)* Genre: Progressive

False Coda were formed in Salamina, Greece, back in 2009 by the Milios brothers, Vasilis and Andrew on guitar and drums respectively. Their line-up is completed by Manos Xanthakis (ex-Agnosia, ex-Jericho, ex-Blazon, ex-Celestial Ode) on vocals, Nikos Pogkas on bass and Lefteris Kapetanious on keyboards. Following years of playing live in the Athens area, FC are finally going to release their debut album 'Close To The Edge'. The production, handled by the band themselves, is very good and the album has been mastered by Jens Bogren (Opeth, Sympony X).

From the first ninety seconds of opening track 'Simple Rules', I was half expecting Queensrÿche to burst from the speakers, however, twenty seconds later it was clear that FC are a Progressive Metal band who are clearly influenced by the mighty Dream Theater (circa 'Scenes From A Memory'/'Systematic Chaos'). Strangely, the opening number is an instrumental and debatably the best song on the album. 'Code Of Kindness' sees the introduction of vocals. I have to say, as only an occasional listener to Progressive Metal, I have struggled a little with Xanthakis' singing which is more a personal preference than a criticism as he sings clearly and with little detection of an accent. I think that my issue here is that with the music being this good, I was expecting a singer in the class of James LaBrie (DT) or Russell Allen (Symphony X) and the latter is a bit unfair. The dissonance between vocals and instruments is most evident on 'Picture', however, the title track 'Closer To The Edge' is more melodic and with the vocals, in a lower register, somewhat improved to my ears.

'Room Of Pain' is another intense number, however, I personally think that the album works best with the songs that have a change of pace like 'Respect' and album closer 'Blood On Eyes', the latter being, arguably, the most commercial track on the album and where I would personally like to see them progress on their next album.

This is a very creditable debut that certainly highlights the talents of guitarist Vasilis Milios and his great interaction with keyboard player Kapetanious, plus the band's ability to write heavy, Progressive, melodic songs. I think that fans of SyX, Fates Warning and Savatage will really enjoy this release.

Mark Donnelly

FIREFORCE – 'DEATHBRINGER' *(Limb)* Genre: Heavy Metal

I must admit there are some excellent (relatively) new Heavy Metal bands out there in Europe these days. The latest discovery for me is this mob from Antwerp, Belgium. Billed as "Combat Power Metal" (yes, quite…), they write about war and combat and tend to dress in combat fatigues with militaristic stage props which, as far as gimmicks go, hasn't been seen much since Udo Dirkschneider parted ways with Accept , so they do have a niche.

A four song EP, ('Moonlight Lady') was released in the spring of 2009 and was primarily used for promotion which got them a deal for their first album 'March On'. Released in 2011, the European press afforded it high praise which enabled Fireforce to tour alongside the likes of Tokyo Blade, Crimson Glory, Avantasia and Tygers Of Pan Tang. Following this, Yves Vermeersch (guitar) replaced Steve Deleu and alongside new drummer Christophe De Combe, bassist Geert Van Dyck and founding members guitarist Erwin Suetens and vocalist Filip 'Flype' Lemmens, they recorded this sophomore effort.

Bristling with killer riffs and high energy this is no nonsense Heavy Metal at its finest. Heavily influenced by Judas Priest there is more than a nod to more modern purveyors like Hammerfall. The title track is fast paced with intense drumming and melodic soloing whilst 'Highland Charge' features heavy melodic riffing. No doubt 'Combat Metal' is their "signature battle song" and generates a crowd sing-along in the live arena but its not generic Metal in the fullest sense as the two guitarists, very much in the vein of Tipton/Downing, play fast arpeggio solos to spice it up. 'Thunder Will Roll' is full of powerful riffing and drums and 'To The Battle' is very much like 'Combat..' with its sing-along battle cry – fierce, aggressive Heavy Metal full of strong riffs and with a great solo.

The closest Fireforce come to Power Metal is in the song 'Words Of Hatred' and 'King Of Lies' is as close to Priest as possible without being plagiarists with its intense riffing and piercing higher Halford-esque vocals.

Fireforce seem quite keen on Egyptian history as they write about the Goddess Sekhmet in the melodic 'Sekhmet – Warrior Goddess' and Anubis in the riff-tastic 'Anubis –Lord Of The Dead' where vocalist Lemmons pulls off some high screams reminiscent of Dream Evil's Niklas Isfeldt on the song 'The Book Of Heavy Metal'. They also do a faithful cover of Tygers' 'Gangland' that sounds sonically better due to the more modern production.

To sum up, not only is Fireforce a fantastic name for a Metal band, but if this was the new Priest album, Heavy Metal fans would be buying it in their hundreds and thousands!

Carl Buxton

GRAVE DIGGER – 'RETURN OF THE REAPER' *(Napalm)* Genre: Heavy Metal

I consider Grave Digger as the most extreme Speed Metal band that could be considered Melodic; and that's a compliment by the way! This quality is achieved by the underlying musicality in the otherwise relentless riffery accompanied by doom laden vocals.

The album commences with the title track (in fact an atmospheric keyboard version of the Death March) with guitars and screams crashing in at the end and leading onto the romping 'Hell Funeral'. From then on until the final track, it is full on Metal but with tuneful guitar solos and thought in the song-writing - not mayhem for mayhem's sake. Guitarist Axel Ritt (aka Ironfinger) has been in the band since 2010's 'The Clans Will Rise Again' and has made his mark on this legendary German band. The phasered intro to 'Tattooed Rider' and intricate solo is in the zone of Eddie Van Halen does Speed Metal. There is complexity in the structure of the songs on show as well, most notable in 'Death Smiles At All Of Us' – complete with a harpsichord intro for full atmospheric value.

Album closer and ballad is 'Need To Believe'; Chris Boltendahl's vocal is tuneful and heartfelt and it is a valid and worthy antidote to the preceding and more typical Grave Digger songs.

'Return Of The Reaper' is a strong album from this well established German Metal band. Grave Digger has a strong audience in Europe and would go down a storm in the U.K. given half a chance. Also, if you are interested, there is a deluxe version of the album accompanied by a bottle of Grave Digger red wine in a mini coffin (in keeping with the cover art and image of the band).

Rob McKenzie

FLOOD OF RED – 'THROW' *(Superball)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

Reviewing can sometimes be an odd thing. You know an album is pretty decent, yet even after numerous listens actually connecting with the sounds and emotions contained within proves a challenge beyond your ears.

What makes that even more difficult is when the band who causes such conflictions hails from a location less than sixty miles from where I call home. Maybe if I made the trip down to Airdrie in Scotland to see Flood Of Red hammer out live some of the tracks from their second album 'Throw', then maybe it would all click into place? Yet after living with this set of songs for a considerable time, I can't quite muster the motivation to attempt that either.

The reasons are pretty simple, in that the style of Post Rock, meets Commercial Rock, via a squidge of Modern Metal and squodge of Prog, it's all just too wishy-washy to be anything other than well written and performed background music. Even with the volume cranked up to speaker splitting levels, there's a quiet politeness about everything that goes on here.

Neither angst ridden enough to veer into The Pineapple Thief territory, nor over confident enough to out grandiose Muse, the comparisons slide towards the Alternative Rock, middle of roadness of Twin Atlantic (especially through the annoyingly Scottish twang of the vocals (and I'm a born and bred Scot)), Lower Than Atlantis or Mallory Knox.

If that sounds potentially chart bothering, or Glastonbury gracing (although they're no Metallica, mind), then it is and for those who maybe like a little more of that self conscious, "I'm enjoying myself by looking like I'm not", about their music, then 'Throw', 'Lashes' or 'White Russian' will be worthy of a little investigation. For anyone looking for something a little more forceful or confident, then I can only recommend the staccato guitar and ploinging keyboards of the Muse-like 'Cutting Limes' and even then without much enthusiasm…

Steven Reid

FOCUS – 'GOLDEN OLDIES' *(In And Out Of Focus)* Genre: Progressive

I don't know whether it was the catalyst for this album (it would have been a major marketing opportunity missed if it weren't) but it can't have hurt the band's profile to have their track 'Hocus Pocus' feature in the latest in the 'RoboCop' series of movies.

Rather than bringing out a standard compilation, the current iteration of the band (founder Thijs van Leer, Pierre van der Linden, Bobby Jacobs and Menno Gootjes) has chosen to get into the studio and record new versions of the selected tracks; personally, I'd have trodden the Steve Hackett path and called the album something like 'Revisited' rather than 'Golden Oldies' as perceptually that sends out a less than encouraging vibe (i.e. dated), which is a shame because it's a rather pleasing collection. Mind you, it depends on your definition of an 'oldie' because 'Aya-Yuppie-Hippie-Yee' is as recent as 2006; not that long ago for a band who released their debut album in 1970.

I have to confess that I was somewhat ambivalent about reviewing this album but it turned out to be a very pleasant surprise and maybe served its purpose by reminding me of the band's wonderful heritage and made me drag out their back catalogue for a listen.

They have been pretty faithful to the original versions, which is a wise move as the longstanding fans really don't like the classics being messed with, however what they have done is refresh the sound, update the production and inject a little more vibrancy.

The track selection will be fairly obvious to an existing fan; you get the "hits" 'Sylvia' and the aforementioned '...Pocus', both of which are rightly hailed as classics. Guitarist Gootjes shines across the entire album and shows he's a worthy successor to the revered Jan Akkerman; his solo on 'Tommy' being particularly good as is his lead work on the closing number, 'Brother'.

By the same token, van Leer's Hammond Organ work is fantastic; he must be one of the best exponents of that instrument, right up there with Jon Lord. Similarly, along with Ian Anderson he made the flute work in a Rock context. Talking of Anderson, 'House Of The King' has a vibe redolent of Jethro Tull as it bounces along on a jaunty refrain.

If you've not yet encountered Focus then this is as good a place to start as any as it lends modern production values to some splendid musical creations.

Gary Marshall

GASOLINE STARS – 'GOOD LOOKS, BAD BEHAVIOUR' *(Independent)* Genre: Hard Rock

Gasoline Stars are the latest band to emerge from the vibrant, yet congested, Swedish Rock scene. The Gothenburg quartet first appeared in 2012 with their 'Loud 'N' Furious' EP, and 'Good Looks, Bad Behaviour' is their full-length debut.

The title and appearance of the band hints at a Glam/Sleaze approach, which is certainly what you get, but it's shot through with that customary Swedish sense of melody that seems to permeate everything that comes from its shores. Throw in some youthful exuberance and you've got what is essentially a good debut effort. I also like the fact that GS haven't resorted to ridiculous stage-names and have also mostly steered clear of the smutty, trashy dumb-ass lyrics that can be a hallmark of the genre. Vocalist Daniel Almqvist has a decent melodic voice, complemented by some great harmony vocals, while guitarist Pontus Gustafsson has contributed some unusual riffs and solos which add something a little different to the norm and stretch the boundaries of this type of music.

Disregarding the title track which is nothing more than a short intro piece, the first proper opening track 'L.O.V.E.' is pretty straightforward Sleaze Rock but then track two, 'Where In Somewhere', is a great Bluesy shuffle of a song with a great slide guitar riff and catchy chorus. 'Exotic Thrill' is all L.A Guns and Faster Pussycat embellished with a horn section, 'Hit It Like You Mean It' is chock-full of "na na na" refrains (very simplistic but insanely catchy), then 'Weekend' strays into Power-Pop territory. The closest thing to a ballad is 'All I Want Is You', a mid-tempo effort built around a simplistic piano refrain that brings to mind Kix's 'Don't Close Your Eyes'.

The second half of the album leans more towards a Metal sound, but 'Scream It', 'Ain't Life Grand' and 'Be With You' still retain a sense of melody, while closer 'You Should've Known Better' returns to the big choruses of the earlier tracks.

As debuts go this has plenty of plus-points, definitely not the finished article, but for sure there's lots of potential to be had.

Ant Heeks

HARMONIC GENERATOR – 'WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN' *(Sonic Revolution/Lungata)* Genre: Rock

Harmonic Generator – I'm not sure about the name but pretty impressed with the album. There's a bit of a story to tell behind 'When The Sun Goes Down', moving from one side of the world to the other and the eventual release of an album recoded over two years ago. HG are a five-piece Bluesy influenced band originally hailing from Marseille, France. Determined to improve their command of English and song-writing skills, they relocated to... Australia. And whilst it may be just about the furthest possible move to achieve that aim, it certainly appears to have paid off having also picked up a whole load of attitude which immediately shone through with a raw, "couldn't give a damn" vibe that is reminiscent of classic Aussie band The Angels, combined with a bit of sleazy arrogance.

'Bad Things' is full of low down dirty rhythms and a chorus of "I just wanna to do, bad things to you" – full of raunchy innuendo. 'Nobody Dies' is probably the heaviest riff laden track on the album before 'Fire' brings the band's more Bluesy, R'n'B influences to the fore. Opening with bass and drum rhythms in tandem, it has all the swagger and retro feel that we're currently seeing in many albums harking back to a 1970s Classic Rock feel.

The powerful vocals of Quentin Barthes-Villegas are impressive throughout, but the real class comes with the guitar work of Charles Roussel and Renaud Satre. Great rhythms and hooks, but most importantly the impressive lead work that proves that speed and notes per second is irrelevant compared to a bit of soul and feeling in a solo. They Rock for sure, but with plenty of sustain and restraint in their playing, all to good effect. 'Rollin' Free' again hits the groove - if Van Halen re-wrote ZZ Top's 'Tush' it would sound like this – with the sort of rich harmony backing vocals that crop up throughout the album.

There's a whole resurgence of 1970s influenced retro style at the moment with the likes of Rival Sons and BlackWolf being held up as champions of the cause, but this is an album that easily fits well and can be viewed on the same level, yet also has the antipodean feel of the aforementioned Angels or even Jet. At nine tracks and little more than thirty-five minutes, it's not the longest album you'll hear this year, but if that bothers you, play it twice – it still won't disappoint.

Ian Parry

GREGORY LYNN HALL – 'HEAVEN TO EARTH' *(AOR Heaven)* Genre: Hard Rock

Gregory Lynn Hall, as some of you will remember, is the lead singer for Roger Scott Craig's 101 South project; he is blessed with a rich, warm Hard Rock voice that made the songs on those albums and this his first solo work stand out. Also having Craig Goldy, Billy Liesegang, Jeff Duncan, Mike Turner, Johnny Navarro and the gloriously named Bandit Bellamia as guest musicians doesn't hurt on your first solo album either.

I have to throw a word of caution in though as I'm not a big fan of the raw and at times rough production and mix of this album. That said, after talking with Hall (interview elsewhere) and finding out that this album was done on little or no budget, in his home studio, with him playing everything except for a few guitar parts and solos, whilst also sitting in the producers chair for the first time, I will have to give the production the benefit of the doubt. That's because there is a wonderful potential that lies within the eleven songs that make up 'Heaven To Earth' because on the whole they do Rock and they are filled with lots of strong vocal melodies and superb guitar solos.

So gripes aside and onto the music which, as I said, does Rock and songs like 'Rockin' The Road', 'Stars In The Night', the Whitesnake/Rainbow like title track with its slow Bluesy vocal, the Thin Lizzy romp of 'I Thought I Saw Heaven', the slow burning 'You Got Me Runnin" (with another superb vocal from Hall) and 'Ordinary Man' all show a singer who knows how to write, sing and perform songs full of muscular Hard Rock melodies.

In summation I have to say that it's a bit shame that the mix doesn't live up to the potential of the songs themselves and that with a better one, this album could have been a real contender for GLH. Next time however (and there should definitely be one) Gregory Lynn Hall and AOR Heaven should get in a "big name" producer to take charge of things, so that he can concentrate on what he does best which is sing and play the music; I fear this time around he had too many fingers in the pie. A good start and I hope a lot more to come.

Ian Johnson

HALO BLIND – 'OCCUPYING FORCES' *(Nautical)* Genre: Progressive

Murmurings of Prog Rock "super-groups" and possible 2010 "Debut Albums Of The Year" had me scritchy scratching my head as to why I hadn't actually heard of Halo Blind before. Although the fact that said debut, 'The Fabric', arrived under the band name Parade and that the line-up of this renamed act (thanks to a now defunct "girl group" – HB is cooler anyway...) only retains two from the original cavalcade, explains much of my scalp scraping.

So gone are Anne Marie Helder, Patrick Berry and Simon Snaize, while hustling through the revolving door come Andy Knights (Chris Helme), Chris Farrell (The Yards, Chris Sheehan) and Stuart Fletcher (Seahorses, Happy Mondays, St Etienne… but don't let that put you off); the returnees being Chris Johnson (Fish, Mostly Autumn, Heather Findlay Band) and Gavin Griffiths (Fish, Mostly Autumn, Panic Room).

Style-wise what this new collective conjure is the modern take on Prog the likes of The Pineapple Thief or Radiohead have created successfully in recent years, an, at times, maudlin outlook lashed to virtuoso performances and bleak lyrical forays. Somehow this admittedly down in the mouth approach causes the listener to smile, as layers and layers of ideas crash together with consistently impressive results. 'Brain Dog' grates stark beats into an abrasive gushing of guitars, 'Torrential' uses a fragile framework to build into a song of strength and depth, 'Mirage' an intricate arrangement of percussion, voice and acoustic guitar to capture the imagination in a gentle grasp, releasing the thoughts midway through to allow them to fly free.

There's no getting away from the claustrophobic and oppressive nature of much of 'Occupying Forces', yet neither can I deny that it is still an album capable of floating and dancing as though a leaf on the wind. Enter with the correct frame of mind and the rewards are great, for the many facets and sounds this album contains, release a slow soak of enjoyment, raising an initially remote sounding experience into one of wonderful familiarity, even though new discoveries always remain around every listening corner.

Steven Reid

HAMMERFALL - '(R):EVOLUTION' *(Nuclear Blast)* Genre: Heavy Metal

If you're a fan of old, you'll know that Hammerfall's last album 'Infected' was a much darker and heavier affair than anything the band had worked on before. Talking recently with Oscar Dronjak, Hammerfall's main song-writer and lead guitarist (see interview elsewhere), he told me that at the time of that album, he was at a low ebb in his life hence the darker songs he was writing. He is now in a much happier place, which can be seen as soon as you see the cover of the new album because Hector is back (those in the know will understand!).

The songs that make up '(r):Evolution' hark back to the classic Hammerfall sound of the 'Glory To The Brave' and 'Legacy Of Kings' years, whilst still looking forward to the future. Each of the songs has an anthemic chorus that after just a few listens you'll be singing along too, while reaching for your plastic sword and shield, bath towel cape and colander helmet (you know you've got them), so as to join in with all the Viking Metal your hearing.

Believe me when I say that this album put a massive stupid grin on my face as I played it and songs like the amazing rifftastic 'Live Life Loud', first single 'Bushido' the throat grabbing 'We Won't Back Down', the killer 'Tainted Metal' and the mayhem that is 'Wildfire' all demand to be played loud and often. What is also very special about the album is the production by the band and Fredrik Nordstrom; a long time Hammerfall friend who has returned to the desk to provide a mix that makes this release sound big and I do mean BIG with a capital B. The whole technical side of the album is just stunning and Hammerfall seem to be reveling in this return to the sound and music they truly love to play.

I said in my review of the Nightmare album (issue #64) that there are many young pretenders to the Metal throne and that the older generation (Nightmare) had just slapped them down. Well Hammerfall have not only slapped them down but knocked them to the bottom of the Castle stairs, casting down their gauntlet and saying "come on you young whippersnappers, let's see if you can do anything to beat this" in their best Brian Blessed tone. Personally I think it will take something pretty special to do that. Hammerfall are back..."Long Live Hector."

Ian Johnson

HARD RIOT – 'THE BLACKENED HEART' *(Pitch Black)* Genre: Hard Rock

Rock music it seems is often best realised with an equally direct, raucous and entertaining approach that is performed with attitude and swagger. Thankfully, the German power trio Hard Riot is the culmination of all these qualities.

'The Blackened Heart' is their "barn burning" sophomore effort (after a five track EP in 2009 and their debit 'Living In The Fast Lane' in 2011) and represents the epitome of straight ahead and uncompromising Rock 'n' Roll. This album proves that the shortest distance between two points is with a straight line. For HR, that line is the distance that exists from the speaker to your ear, delivering a simple, yet powerful statement as soon as you initiate "play".

The immediacy of '…Heart' is only one of many reasons that makes this album so enjoyable. They pay homage to AC/DC's no frills approach with songs that are short (all clocking in around three and a half minutes) and a song structure that is refreshingly simple. The songs feature bombastic choruses and the album's momentum is "fires on all cylinders" for the duration. These guys refuse to take themselves seriously and showcase their humor with 'Devils BBQ', a high octane, Southern-tinged Rocker.

Since their forte is in writing modern Hard Rock music that pays homage to the great bands of yore, '…Heart' is absolutely essential for fans of Nickelback and Bombay Black. Short and sweet, heavy and hard, simple and unpretentious, Hard Riot is a refreshing answer to many of the ponderous and self-indulgent sub-genres of Hard Rock and Heavy Metal where the message requires repeated study of the album's liner notes.

These guys deliver the goods in spades and those who need a respite from the everyday grind will find that Hard Riot is just the medicine they need to get through the day... Oh yeah, did I forget to mention that these guys absolutely ROCK!

Brent Rusche

HOLLYWOOD MONSTERS – 'BIG TROUBLE' *(Mausoleum)* Genre: Hard Rock

Hollywood Monsters suggests a band, but the reality is this album is created around Steph Honde, a multi instrumentalist who handles lead vocals, guitars, piano and bass. A French expatriate now residing in California, Honde can hold his head high in Rock circles due to his experiences with French Rock band Café Bertrand, who opened for the likes of AC/DC and Deep Purple.

Honde ended up befriending legendary bass player Tim Bogert and managed to persuade him to play on some new Rock material, which resulted in this album. Bogert is not the only big name present here – keyboards are contributed by none other than Don Airey, with drums being handled by Dio and Black Sabbath stalwart Vinny Appice.

With that kind of backing, there's a lot of pressure on Honde to meet expectations. On 'Move On' he manages that in spades – the playing is great but the biggest and most pleasant surprise is his voice, which sounds a lot like Jorn Lande's. The title track is similarly strong, although some of Honde's accent creeps into the phrasing here and there. After the mellow 'The Only Way' he delivers another excellent impression of Lande's lower register on 'The Cage'; he can't match Lande's ability to soar and wisely doesn't try.

The album loses momentum midway through – following on from its two lightweight predecessors; 'The Ocean' is mostly acoustic and synth strings followed by the plodding 'Oh Boy!' It takes 'Underground' to pep things up while the Heaven And Hell-esque 'Village Of The Damned' sees Appice firmly in his comfort zone. Closing bonus track 'Fuck You All' features Paul Di'Anno on vocals and is the most Hard Rock flavoured effort of all the material contained on the album.

There's some decent stuff on the album, particularly at the beginning and the end, and I was impressed with Honde, but a bit of variety in tempo in the middle of the album would have made it a much better listen.

James Gaden

HELIX – 'BASTARD OF THE BLUES' *(Perris)* Genre: Hard Rock

Helix is one of those bands that don't need any further introduction – nearly every one of us has their 1980s classics 'Walkin' The Razor's Edge' and 'Wild In The Streets' in our record collections. Now, five years after the previous Helix album 'Vagabond Bones' hit the shelves – followed only by the five-song EP three years ago – it's time to realize nothing much has changed in this band's camp; with maybe the exception of some fresh ideas that the new album 'Bastard Of The Blues' is a perfect realization of.

What about a portion of Blues-infused Hard Rock driven with tasty, muscular guitar riffs for a good start? And although the opening 'Bastard Of The Blues' is no drastic shift from the classic Helix style, it still doesn't sound dated either. Tracks such as 'Even Jesus (Wasn't Loved In His Hometown)' or 'Hellbound For A Heartbreak' are in the same vein, with straight-in-your-face lyrics, feisty vocals, aggressive guitar and thumping bass. But 'Bastard...' isn't all rough and rowdy, and so neither was Helix. Just listen to the infectious 1980s infused melody of 'Winning Is The Best Revenge' or the soaring power ballad 'When All The Love Is Gone' for a bit of a nostalgic plunge, and you'll certainly end up sketching a draft of the time machine to go back thirty years in time. There is a little treat for every fist-pumping and head-banging Rocker out there as well – 'Metal At Midnight' doesn't let us forget it's the same band that gave us 'Rock You' and often dwelled upon the clichéd, yet fan favourite topic of the beauty of Heavy Metal. Alongside the new material, there are tracks which will be remember from the 2011 Helix EP 'Skin In The Game' – the guitar-laden titled track and fast-paced 'The Bitch Is A Bullet' – but the biggest surprise music-wise comes from the grand finale. If you ever wondered if the Canadians can kick butt playing Americana – listen to 'Sticks And Stones'; a Country-infused gallop with Bluesy overtones which leaves you thinking "oh yes, they can".

'Bastard Of The Blues' is a classy record from a classy band, and not a disappointment in any way. It's still the same ol' Helix we have all loved since 1979's 'Breaking Loose', but still to be counted among serious candidates and one for my "Top 10 Albums Of 2014".

Alexandra Mrozowska

HOT FIRE – 'LOST IN ROCK & ROLL' *(Fly Electric)* Genre: Hard Rock

Not quite the saviours of Rock 'n' Roll they proclaim to be (does it need saving?) but Hot Fire espouse the type of alcohol-bothering, hip-thrusting strut that makes Rock 'n' Roll such a dangerously exciting obsession for those of us that love it. Some great guitar licks and riffs and bags of energy are abound on their debut album 'Lost In Rock & Roll' that delivers lusty Rock 'n' Roll with Sleazy Rock in a smoky fug.

The Boston quartet takes in the likes of Lenny Kravitz and L.A. Guns in a mixture that always threatens to unveil a true gem with each track. Despite a lively rhythm section and well-executed solos, the promise of a killer track never really delivers. Hints at greatness are laid out then pulled away when things get too close.

But 'Lost In Rock & Roll' is far from a lost cause. Some lively guitar solos help to ramp up the style and in 'Talk Of The Town' and 'Bite The Bullet' they have two bonafide Rock blasts that force out sneering vocals and pounding guitar riffs. All the way through the album, each riff is an inventive, high voltage riot that picks up an often weak vocal performance and benefits from a Rocking rhythm section.

Hot Fire never fully break out of their shell; they tell a good Hard Rock tale but it's clear they don't live it; when it comes to sleazy Rock 'n' Roll that's the key. Not so much a hot fire as a warm burn, you can take a stroll in "Rock & Roll" but you won't get lost.

Dan Bond

HOUSTON – 'RELAUNCH II' *(Livewire/Cargo)* Genre: AOR

Houston, we have... an album? We do indeed, yet the Swedes' new release is more like "something old, something new, something (or much) borrowed..." etc. A fair bit of 'Relaunch II', similarly to the 2011 prequel to it, comprises of cover versions of songs originating from the 1980s right up to recent times, with only four tracks being the band's original compositions.

The genre-related diversity between the songs Houston chose to cover may also raise a few eyebrows – the approach the band has taken is just to perform their versions well rather than to mess with them too much. There isn't much of a twist for the unearthed AOR gem 'Justice For One' (John Farnham's 1984 classic) Rick Springfield's 'Souls' or 'Love Is Blind' (originally by John O'Banion). These are safe choices from a genre-wise perspective, I thought it was going to be a bit more challenging to deal with songs and artists that might not have been such a blatant influence for a Melodic Rock act. But, as it turns out, 'Cruise' of Florida Georgia Line's catalogue retains much of the stomach-churning Country-Pop quality to it and also 'Counting Stars' (2013 hit by One Republic and a duet with Victor Lundberg) sounds almost exactly the same as the dull, radio-friendly original. Yet, to most Rock fans' surprise, the sole bright spot among the newer covers is 'Do What You Want'. Although Houston's version of Lady Gaga's Electronic Dance Music track is closer to Pop than Rock, its assets are a fine, catchy melody and an interesting vocal duo (Hank Erix and singer/producer Lizette Von Panajott). It's no knock-out but enjoyable none the less.

As for the bunch of brand new songs on the album – things start with a fine AOR mid-tempo 'Don't Look Back'. Keyboard-driven and catchy Pomp Rock piece 'Our Love' features guests from Reckless Love, Crazy Lixx, Casablanca and Reach. 'Downtown' is slightly too Poppy for my taste, but a neat, hooky song anyway – preceding the last track, an average Pop Rock ballad 'Standing On The Moon'.

Even though not all of these four songs are gems, I suspect I'm still not the only one who'd be happier to get an album of entirely original material from Houston rather than 'Relaunch II'. The album has it's bright spots and its flaws, it's certain the band still has potential. Personally, I look forward to an appropriate follow-up to the excellent 'II', this – I think – being only the warm-up.

Alexandra Mrozowska

INFINITY'S CALL – 'UNCONDITIONAL' *(Sonic Revolution)* Genre: Hard Rock

Ten years after their debut, German Metal monsters Infinity's Call have, for some reason, decided to give it another try. There seems to be a lot of this "massive gap between first and second albums" thing going on these days, and whilst it doesn't mean an album is going to be bad (see Crown of Glory elsewhere), I think ten years is pushing it unless your debut is hailed as a lost classic or something.

Anyway, I'd never heard of the band, so went in with open mind and ears, hoping for something sensational. What I got was an album that feels very retro and very 1980s Metal. The music is pretty chuggy, throwing pounding drums and relentless riffs at the listener, enlivened by some exceptional guitar work by Philipp Zanella, who is the undoubted star of the show. Vocalist Claus Zeller has a voice that is a bit "fingernails down the blackboard" to be honest. It's not too screechy, but something about his traditional Metal rasp just gives me a headache. It doesn't help that when there's no guitar solo most of the songs are very middle of the road, often similar to Skid Row, if they hadn't been all that good (if you see what I mean).

'Unconditional' is one of those albums that is very, very average but made more listenable by some cool guitar solos. If all the songs were more like the fast paced 'Emotional Evolution' rather than the plodding 'Unconditional Love' this would have worked, but they aren't, so it doesn't.

Alan Holloway

INTELLIGENT MUSIC PROJECT II – 'MY KIND O' LOVIN'' *(Im Intelligent)* Genre: AOR

Intelligent Music was established by Dr. Milen Vrabevski, musical producer, composer and patron of the arts, in continuation of the Bulgarian Memory Foundation programme for preservation and popularisation of the Bulgarian Cultural Heritage.

'My Kind O' Lovin'' is the follow-up to the critically acclaimed Intelligent Music Project I 'The Power of Mind'. This concept album was written and produced by Vrabevski about his view of life and its one which many people both share and aspire to living; love, friendship, no prejudice and waking up each day knowing that it is going to be great. The writer has put this all together in a cornucopia of melodic musical styles ranging from Progressive to Country, from West Coast to Rock. The musicians, talented beyond belief, are mostly Bulgarians with the exception of ex-Toto drummer Simon Phillips, ex-Uriah Heep vocalist John Lawton (who featured on the IMP I album) and current Toto singer Joseph Williams.

The album starts very quietly with the sounds of waves gently lapping against the shore introducing the laid-back title track 'My Kind Of Lovin''. The second track, 'Friends', is the first of four to feature the Toto's brilliant vocalist Williams and is another laid back AOR number

with the first of many superb guitar solos by Plamen Chepanov.

'No One Can Deny It' is the first track to have a Rock back bone and is a real gem with Lawton's vocals being especially impressive. 'Get Into Real' is the closest that Williams comes to sounding like he is singing for Toto. 'Simple Game' is a beautiful ballad and 'Happiness' (Williams' vocals) has a Latin feel with more superb guitar work that is delightfully understated.

If anything, the second half of the album gets even better, starting with the theatrical 'Things We Can't Do' that takes a Progressive upbeat heading towards the end of the song. 'Time To Move Along' is more traditional Melodic Rock and one of my favourite songs on the album. 'People On Fire' has fast choruses juxtaposed to the slow verses that are underpinned with more luscious guitars and occasional string section. You will be hard pressed to hear a smoother track than the West Coast of 'Step In Learnin" with Williams at his absolute best. Penultimate track, 'Understand The Morning' has a mid-West Country vibe and 'Conclusion' just throws everything into the pot and even includes brief piano, synth, drum and bass solos.

'My Kind O' Lovin' is possibly the most cerebral album that I have ever heard, yet despite this claim it is not pretentious in any shape or form but just a glorious, classy fusion of AOR styles.

Mark Donnelly

J.B.O. – 'NUR DIE BESTEN WERDEN ALT' *(AFM)* Genre: Heavy Metal

When I was asked to write this I didn't quite know how to do it; how to review the new album 'Nur die Besten werden alt' by J.B.O. – a German-speaking band – for a U.K based magazine. I will try to explain why their 10th studio album – irrespective of the language – should be heard by everyone into good, fun, intelligent and – of course – loud Metal music.

J.B.O. was founded twenty-five years ago by the two front-men Hannes Holzmann and Vito C. as a totally fun project. They called themselves "James Blast Orchestra" but the record company of German easy listening band James Last Orchestra sued J.B.O in 1996 for the likelihood of name confusion). Their first couple of concerts mainly consisted of metal-ish cover versions with awesomely funny new lyrics. If one could describe what J.B.O.'s music is like, I can only agree with the band who say it's "Comedy Metal". Their lyrics, their outfits/appearance (pink is the new black!) and the way they re-interpret old Pop songs is unique and surely nothing to be analysed in detail but just enjoyed.

You may now understand that their latest creation 'Nur die...' ('Only The Good Get Old') is surely not an album where any highly sophisticated musical elements need to be discovered – even though the musical abilities of these guys are fantastic! The album contains nineteen songs; thirteen Heavy Metal songs you can just bang your head along too and six "comedic" intermissions. If you can find the special edition, amongst the extra goodies you will also find a bonus disc which features 13 J.B.O. mega hits all recorded with in brillliant sound quality.

The album itself starts with 'Vier Finger für ein Hallelujah' ('Four Fingers For A Hallelujah') which is followed by 'Death Is Death' – a brilliant ode to 'Life is Life' by Opus – very typical J.B.O. 'Sakradi mei Sack is hi' ('Holy Shit, My Balls Are Broken') in Franconian patois may be very tough to understand by foreigners but it's such a fun song and has so much feeling – just like the whole album does – that it will surely be enjoyed while being badly drunk at the next party. 'Schule aus' ('School's Out' – Alice Cooper), 'Metal No. 666' ('Mambo No. 5' – Lou Bega) and 'Das Bier ist da zum Trinken' ('The Beer Is There For Drinking' instead of "these boots that were made for walking" as sung by Nancy Sinatra) are three more fantastic, funny cover versions. Insanely cool 'Was würde Jesus tun?' ('What Would Jesus Do?') and 'Die Waldfee' (roughly translated 'Whoops A Daisy') are my personal smile-inducing highlights.

All I can say is grab yourself some friends, some beers and just switch your brains off for a while. Sing along – in whatever language – and become a 'Verteidiger des wahren Bloedsinns' ('Defender Of The True Nonsense'), don't take life too seriously and just enjoy having a big, fun, pink party!

Julia Braun

JOE BONAMASSA – 'DIFFERENT SHADES OF BLUE' *(Provogue)* Genre: Blues/Soul

The Joe Bonamassa releases just keep coming, making you wonder which is going to dry up first – his audience's enthusiasm for new product, or his creativity. At the moment, listening to 'Different Shades Of Blue', his creativity is at a peak and the quality is sure to keep audiences entertained.

This brand new studio record sees Bonamassa concentrate on writing his own material, the first time one of his solo releases hasn't had a cover version present since 2002's 'So It's Like That.' Fortunately, the quality of the writing on offer here means that the always well executed covers aren't even missed.

The title of the album is a good indication of the contents, with Bonamassa exploring the Blues in all its forms. 'Oh Beautiful!' is dirty Blues Rock, 'Love Ain't A Love Song' is a brilliant, Funk tinged, horns embellished foot tapper, while the shuffling 'Living On The Moon' makes it impossible not to sway to the beat.

There's a lot of the brass section on this album, which is a big plus for me, and Bonamassa uses it superbly to add colour to the tunes. Their presence on 'Heartache Follows Wherever I Go' reminded me of the great Gary Moore around the 'Cold Day In Hell' period, and the piano on 'Never Give All Your Heart' adds a Bad Company vibe.

The swinging 'I Gave Up Everything For You, 'Cept The Blues' is a textbook example of how good the Blues can be when it's done right. The atmospheric title track is a real grower, as is the stomping 'Get Back My Tomorrow'. Another Funky horns number in the form of 'Trouble Town' sweeps you to the Gospel tinged finale 'So, What Would I Do'. Bonamassa's playing is to the usual exemplary standard and his vocals are excellent throughout.

The album has a cohesive and easy flow, passes by extremely quickly and delivers the goods. As far as I'm concerned, taking control of the writing has resulted in 'Different Shades Of Blue' being Joe Bonamassa's most accomplished album so far.

James Gaden

JOHN GARCIA – 'JOHN GARCIA' *(Napalm)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

The name John Garcia may not be familiar to Fireworks readers, though his previous band Kyuss should be. For some time Garcia has been busy with the band Visto Chino (originally called Kyuss Lives) but this though is his first step into the solo world of recording.

Garcia keeps his sound close to his previous bands output, bleak and of course very much Grunge. Opening number 'My Mind' is so badly recorded it could be a demo, the guitars are a distorted mess and Garcia's vocals are buried in the mix, which leaves things sounding a primitive clutter.

Fortunately 'Rolling Stoned' (a Black Mastiff cover) improves in sound quality and things take a turn for the better. The sound is close to early Soundgarden, bass heavy and vocals that sound tortured and only used when required.

'Saddleback' is by the far the best number, only due to the similarity to something Jimi Hendrix might have released and is, by the standards of this release, almost upbeat!

The most interesting moment comes with 'His Bullets' Energy', which features Doors guitar player Robbie Krieger as guest. Unfortunately any Doors fan would be hard pushed to be impressed, as there is little, if anything, of the legends magic to be heard.

Most of the songs follow a pattern of sounding almost like glorified jams, the music dense and grubby and quite under accommodating to the listener. Fans that appreciated John Garcia's previous work will enjoy this, as an extension of his musical explorations. For the rest of us it as a reminder of everything we disliked about Grunge and the nineties.

Ray Paul

LARS ERIC MATTSSON – 'HOT & ABLE 1983-85' *(Lion)* Genre: Rock

When you have this much music in your soul, it should not be a surprise that an artist looks back over the years, and reaches in for some creations from an era gone past – realises their potential and re-records them! That is just what Lars Eric Mattsson has done with this, his twenty-forth release entitled 'Hot And Able 1983-85'!

This record is a collection of early Mattsson compositions that haven't really seen the light of day, other than live performances when he was touring with his early band Joe Cool. Although re-recorded, each piece stays true to the original intent and arrangement. They also display just how advanced a guitar player and composer Mattsson was – remember this was in the early eighties! Yes, he has updated these rivers of music, mostly adding the vocals himself (they were first performed by a female vocalist) and some of the lyrics were modified slightly. All in all, 'Hot...' retains the original structure of each song.

In addition to Mattsson's razor sharp voice, he plays bass and guitar on this release and has drummer Christer Jansson and organist Alexander King performing alongside; upon listening, one will hear his early influences. The talent of the man and the creativity of this artist is unbelievable when we think that these sixteen tracks represent his first forays into composing modern music! The interplay between the Hammond Organ and his guitar is simply extraordinary! Then, there is that fusion of Jazz and Hard Blues which, in some expressions, just elevates the song to the highest level, and some all out Rockers are also present! As one journeys through this fine collection, one will realise just how much ahead of his time Mattsson was and still is! I can only imagine what it was like to see him perform these pieces; your eyes wouldn't move off of him…and the sounds that he brought forth – simply another amazing aspect!

Although 'Hot...' is collection of compositions from the early eighties, the production is stellar due to Mattsson recording them earlier this year and one can hear the loving hands that went in to producing this release. The interplay between him and Alexander's Hammond brings forth visions of Ritchie Blackmore and Jon Lord; mind you, no copying, just the same atmosphere. Some of the pieces groove along, and are fuelled by Mattsson's Blues interpretations – making for a good romp through some straight-up Rock!

'Hot And Able 1983-85' is a timeless collection from a timeless master musician – a journey from Hard Blues to Progressive Jazz fused Rock and only performed by the likes of Lars Eric Mattsson!

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

JOMMO NOKES – 'THE LAST BUT ONE' *(Independent)* Genre: Melodic Rock

Born and raised in Czechoslovakia, then primarily delivering dance music throughout Germany, Jommo Nokes is now living his dream of solely creating/producing music that reflects the Rock and Pop artists who have been a strong influence on his life so far – Gary Moore, Yngwie Malmsteen, Joe Satriani, Alice Cooper, Van Halen and Nik Kershaw would appear to have all played a part in the crafting of 'The Last But One', and occasionally you do witness microscopic snippets, but not enough I'm afraid. Nokes' biggest attributes are his confidence and belief, which he has in abundance; so much so that on his extremely minimalist website this album is upheld as "A Rock album made to stand the test of time" – there's confidence and belief for you ... but only you can decide if it's misguided or not!

The fifteen songs (far too many, I think) showcase Nokes' early song-writing years, and he certainly provides a variation of styles. Initially, I suppose this was intended as a "guitar" album, but Nokes takes every opportunity to demonstrate his abilities on vocals, drums, keyboards and bass too. Without question, he has positioned his best songs upfront, and 'Noneday', 'Uneven Match', 'With Her' and 'Draft' are all proficient songs with high tempos, riffs and brief guitar breaks that leave you wanting more ... much more.

Nokes' vocals are more than competent, but, not surprisingly, they do carry a slight European, monosyllabic accent which some of you may find a tad uncomfortable; I didn't, and found it only added to the personality of the album. As the opus passes the mid-point it regrettably begins to lose a large proportion of its "Rock" qualities in favour of Euro Pop/Rock characteristics with lightweight keyboard interjections and shallow lyrical content. Having said that, even the most prominent Pop offerings, 'Eat Me If You Love Me' (see what I mean about lyrical content?!), or the Men At Work vibe of 'Reality Hurts' are rescued by the aforementioned guitar interplays. Throughout this album I was thinking that maybe a "guitar instrumental" direction should have been adopted instead, and with the five minute 'Nommo Jokes' I believe my theory may have substance; only the guitar techs amongst you can decide that.

Remember, the name is Jommo Nokes, NOT John Noakes of "get down Shep" fame. So no gold Blue Peter badge for this album; not even a silver one! However, full marks must be given to a man who has put his heart and soul into this album. As Leo Sayer once sang,

"...I'm a one man band, nobody knows or understands, is there anybody out there want to lend me a hand..." – I sincerely hope so.

Dave Crompton

KADAVAR – 'LIVE IN ANTWERP' *(Nuclear Blast)* Genre: Progressive

Germany's Kadavar have decided it's time to release a live document of one of their shows, recorded in Antwerp, and it is perfect introduction to their musical strengths in the live arena.

Long-term fans of the band will find excitement in new song 'Eye Of The Storm', which to these ears has a passing resemblance to 'Killers' era Iron Maiden. Kadavar's influences are certainly in the early eighties days of Metal, and 'Living In Your Head' always brings to mind early Witchfynde.

Unlike a lot of supposed live releases, the sound is authentic and seems untouched in the studio, polite applause fills up the gaps in the songs and there is little if any on-stage communication with the audience.

'Purple Sage' takes on a whole new vibe in the live environment; it just takes off into Psychedelic Prog that clocks in at around eleven minutes and leaves your head spinning.

'Broken Wings' and 'Come Back Life' are dynamic in delivery, and very reminiscent of some of Hawkwind's space age jams.

There is no faulting the song selection though; either way, unless you are a hardcore fan, ploughing through the album in one sitting may prove a little heavy going, as the songs follow a similar pattern of delivery which blends one song into another.

That said, if new song '...Storm' is anything to go by, exciting things are ahead for Kadavar.

Ray Paul

KAINE – 'THE WAYSTONE' *(Independent)* Genre: Heavy Metal

On release of their second album 'The Waystone', Kaine have put their hat firmly in the ring for contention to be dubbed the new British Heavy Metal heroes. With each new release they have improved with an addition of further style and grit adding scuffed leather to their already dirty denim. Taking all that was good about the NWOBHM gangs, Kaine take that fiery charge and run with it adding some melodic hooks along the way.

'Dreams To Nightmares', 'Resistance' and the sensational, guitar laden 'Wanderer' blend melody, anger and persistent riffs that blast wilfully unpolished Heavy Metal spirit from every angle. Certainly not pretty, but British Heavy Metal never promised to clean its teeth or wash its clothes; it's Metal warts n' all. Unfortunately Kaine struggle slightly at the slower passages on 'The New Wave' and 'Solidarity' but when they do get going there's absolutely no stopping their charge

For all the Iron Maiden comparisons thrown at them, it's a far reach by any stretch of the imagination. Sure there are shades of the more grizzly Killers-era Maiden thanks to a less polished voice similar to Paul Di Anno and widdly twin guitar segments, but Bruce Dickinson's flag-waving extravagance is not quite in sight.

Whether you think the NWOBHM sound died in the 1980s or it kept softly bubbling along this whole time, it would be foolish to deny the fact Kaine are among the best currently keeping the sound alive and well. They're not quite the finished article but 'The Waystone' is an improvement on their last time out. Everything on display here bodes well for Kaine's Heavy Metal future.

Dan Bond

KALIDIA – 'LIES' DEVICE' *(Independent)* Genre: Power Metal

Album reviews can be mostly more hit-or-miss affairs when the task at hand is to critique a band of which you have no prior knowledge. However, when the expectations are removed and the album delivers, the impact is somewhat magical; the debut from Kalidia entitled 'Lies' Device' is one such recording.

Hailing from the Tuscany region in Lucca, Italy, Kalidia is a Female-Fronted quintet who has been delivering their brand of Power Metal since 2010 with their release of the 'Dance Of The Four Winds' EP.

2014 shows them soldering on and adding to their discography with their first full-length album in the band's career. Since their debut EP, it is clear that they have been patient and working tirelessly to create a long player that will perk the ears of many a listener preferring music of a heavier, yet just as equally melodic persuasion.

Vocalist Nicoletta Rosellini floats atop the rhythm section's tumultuous and substantial backbone creating a juxtaposition that works well. The fleet-footed, double bass drumming of Gabriele Basile gives each song a momentum that brings to mind Steve Harris' galloping bass lines, a defining characteristic of much of Iron Maiden's catalogue. From the massive organ intro of 'The Lost Mariner' to the last notes of 'In Black And White', this album is strictly up-tempo. 'Shadow Will Be Gone' is the only track that restrains the pace in the form of an eloquent and artful ballad.

This album comprises strength in all the primary areas including vocals, melodies, riffs, drums and keyboards making 'Lies' Device' worthy of a near-perfect score. Despite how well the album resonates, the proverbial "Achilles Heel" stands to be the guitar solos. From the virtuosity which has become commonplace of the mighty six/seven/eight stringer these days, the guitar solos lack the technique and precision that the album deserves. Guitar prowess aside, Kalidia is worthy of accolades in the arena of Female-Fronted Hard Rock/Heavy Metal bands.

Brent Rusche

KINGS OF THE SUN – 'ROCK TIL YA DIE' *(Independent)* Genre: Rock

I remember watching Black Leather by Kings Of The Sun on Raw Power in the wee small hours of the morning back in the day and thinking what a great band they were. Vocalist Jeff Hoad was an awesome sex god of a front-man and his brother Clifford Hoad was one of the best drummers around. 'Rock Til Ya Die' is the latest release after a break of twenty years and now features Cliff Hoad, who is the only remaining original member, on drums and vocals.

A mix of down and dirty Rock songs and anthems, this album has been receiving critical acclaim around the globe. He may not be quite as polished as Jeff Hoad, but with his Bluesier and rasping delivery, Cliff Hoad has this album sewn up. He has, quite rightly, re-titled the band Clifford Hoad's Kings Of The Sun and has assembled some great musicians for the album in guitarist Quentin Elliott, rhythm guitarist Dave Talon and bass player/producer Govinda Doyle.

It's hard not to liken them to AC/DC in some ways, but they're so much more than that. Songs like 'Reach For The Bottle' and 'Switchblade Knife' are towards the simpler Rock 'n' Roll style, but the opener 'Fire On The Mountain' just oozes class and 'Rock Pile' is made for dancing to. 'Heart's Ablaze' is epic from start to finish with the title track 'Rock Til Ya Die' being yet another classic with an awesome guitar solo from Elliott.

It may not be an album that you instantly warm to, but trust me – take the time, play it in the car a few times on a hot, sunny day, get to know the songs and you'll love it.

Sue Ashcroft

MASSIVE – 'FULL THROTTLE' *(Earache)* Genre: Hard Rock

It is on Black Spiders' outstanding 'This Savage Land' release and the track 'Knock You Out' that come the words "…let there be drums, let there be guitars, let the mayhem ensue". And when hearing this, Massive's debut 'Full Throttle', those words ring particularly true for holy hell does this ever Rock. Massive have thankfully made the decision to kick the Metal world's ass by releasing a rip snorting collection of guitar heavy Hard Rock with some great vocal harmonies thrown in for good measure.

Sounding like a mixture of the guitars of the outstanding White Wizard and the heaviness of Love/Hate, with the melodic harmonies of 'Strange Wind' era (of the criminally underappreciated) T.S.O.L. thrown in for good measure, Massive have a sound that is comparable to that next door garage band that everyone wants to have play at their next backyard alco-thon. Impossible to ignore and completely burying itself in your Hard Rock soul, Massive have one agenda - never allowing the listener to catch their breath and keep their head banging continually from the opening track to the very end.

The songs themselves are simple but effective. As each song progresses through its playing time, the music draws the listener in, and we get lost in that which is swirling around us. A reach for the volume knob is made, and then it happens – we are thrown into a land where only Hard Rock guitars and heavy handed drums rule.

Listen (loudly) to the assault that is 'Hollywood', the massive (all puns intended) guitars of 'One By One', the drums of 'Big Trend Setter', the bass guitar of 'Dancefloor', the loud and completely infectious 'Lacey', (which reminded me of the sadly defunct band Overloaded and their totally killer song 'Flashy Girl' from their 2007 'Regeneration' release). Things only get better as you hear the lyrics of the awesome 'Ghost' and the vocal screams during the intro of 'If You Want Blood, You've Got It' (an AC/DC cover bonus track).

Yeah, this is great stuff. I know I've said it before but I don't care, I'm going to say it again – hey American and British radio, pick up on music like this, would ya?

Franco Cerchiari

KIX – 'ROCK YOUR FACE OFF' *(earMUSIC/Loud & Proud)* Genre: Hard Rock

In 2012 it was announced that Italy's Frontiers Records had signed Baltimore's finest export, the band putting out a live CD through the label the same year. Two years on and the band's long awaited studio album is appearing through a different label and, with a few reservations, it's apparent that very little else has changed in the world of the quirkiest of all the AC/DC-influenced acts. Main song-writer Donnie Purdell may be long gone but his writing style remains in founding members Steve Whiteman (vocals), Brian "Damage" Forsythe and Ronnie "10/10" Younkins (guitars), Jimmy "Chocolate" Chalfant (drums) and current bassist Mark Schenker.

As with all of Kix's previous albums there are the off-the-wall melodies and slightly naughty word play, the catchy 'Tail On The Wag' and latter day Alice Cooper strains of 'Love Me With Your Top Down' being cases in point, but the band can also lock into a groove and raise the maturity level, like on the slow burner 'You're Gone' and the punchy earworm 'All The Right Things'. Opener 'Wheels In Motion' is a great Rocker with a feel good vibe and Whiteman's quick fire delivery; it's so good that it should slot straight into the live set alongside the hits from their heyday.

Elsewhere I'm afraid it all gets a bit samey with the inevitable AC/DC vibe of 'Rollin' In Honey' and the dreadfully average trio 'Dirty Girls', 'Can't Stop The Show' and the title track. The ballad 'Inside Outside' doesn't reach previous heights either and the band even plagiarize themselves with the "Midnite Dynamite"-like 'Rock And Roll Showdown', made even more obvious by the fact that the original is one of two live tracks that follow it, along with 'Love Pollution'.

You can probably tell that I'm a little disappointed with this, especially after a nineteen year wait, and the dry production doesn't help either, robbing the band of their trademark sharpness. However, there's half of a good album here and I look forward to hearing some of those songs live at some point.

Phil Ashcroft

LANDMARQ – 'ORIGINS: ANTHOLOGY 1991-2014' *(Synergy)* Genre: Progressive

Landmarq formed in 1990 and it's therefore a surprise that their discography features only five studio albums, three with original vocalist Damian Wilson and two with incumbent Tracy Hitchings. This seeming lack of activity was in part due to Hitchings falling foul of two forms of cancer, thankfully she recovered and this has been the catalyst for the reigniting of the Landmarq brand.

They have chosen to put together this two disc compilation which covers the band's two eras, but rather than just lifting the studio tracks they've elected to use some live versions plus giving us a lengthy new song which also happens to be the title track. For those not familiar with the band and who have a liking for Neo-Prog, this will be a very good place to start their research. It's a good selection that demonstrates the band's song-writing capabilities and the ability to write strong choruses and refrains.

The first disc is the 'Tracy Years' and features nine tracks including 'Origins' and gives a

fine representation of the qualities of the band which include excellent songs and playing. For me the question mark is Hitchings' voice which, not unlike Sue Willetts of Dante Fox, can come across as thin, reedy and a bit shrill in places which is fine for one song but feels rather samey across an entire album. That said, her performance on the excellent 'Lighthouse' is superb, moving from breathy verses to full belt on the choruses where Heart's Ann Wilson comes to mind in places. I can't help but think she'd have made it in Musicals.

Similarly, Wilson on disc two is an acquired taste. There are times when I think his work is terrific but equally I find the vibrato and swoops he employs rather distracting and I would prefer a simpler style. The production on disc two feels a tad dated while Steve Leigh's keyboards sound remarkably like early Marillion.

The aforementioned new song will be of particular interest to existing fans and over its eleven minutes it encapsulates everything they'll love about the band including a catchy chorus. Relatively sparse verses explode when the chorus arrives during the song's first third. A complete change then ensues with an almost Pink Floyd quiet mid-section before the heaviness returns.

If you like keyboards then Landmarq are a band for you but in Uwe D'Rose they also possess a guitarist who can structure a fine solo.

A fine collection of songs but probably one to try before you buy.

Gary Marshall

LANEY'S LEGION – 'LANEY'S LEGION' *(Perris)* Genre: Hard Rock

One has to wonder when Chris Laney finds time to sleep so prolific is his production output, and it's easy to forget that he is a song-writer and performer in his own right. Technically I guess this is his "third" album following the acclaimed 'Pure' and 'Only Come Out At Night'; this self-titled offering, 'Laney's Legion', differs in that it's actually a band (as opposed to a direct "solo" album) made up of Danger Danger's Rob Marcello on guitar/vocals, Mats Vassfjord (Grand Design and Impera) on bass/vocals and Patrik Jansson on drums. "I really missed the feeling of having a band, I wanted to get back to basics" says Laney, "This time it's all about the songs" and he and long-time partner Anders Ringman have written an album of very fine songs indeed.

If you're a fan of the first two, you won't be disappointed with 'Laney's...'; opening with 'On & On' it reassures you that this is most definitely the Laney "sound". 'Taste Of Your Tongue' will forever remain in my heart for managing to get away with the immortal line "but how can I resist you when your panties hit the floor". 'Poptastic' is a catchy slice of Pop kitsch that celebrates the joy of the 1980s MTV glory days whilst 'Beneath The Surface' is a slice of heavy, riffy Rock driven by the rhythm section and accented with Marcello's fine guitar solo. Ballads on albums frequently irritate me as (for me) they can change the album's flow too much but the opening banjo on 'Bleed Within' sets it apart; it shouldn't work but it does and is possibly my favourite track. 'Let's Get It On' oozes out of the speakers like chocolate – the songs never lose pace or get distracted by lengthy solos, Marcello comes in like a ninja, assaults your ears for a few seconds and then disappears back – and the solo in this and 'Hollow' are good examples of this tactic. 'Lady Luck' (co-written by ex-Tigertailz front-man Steevi Jaimz) is full of punch and heavy groove, 'Assassin Of Our Love' soars and swoops and 'No One Can Stop Us' is another riff filled offering. Final track 'Legion' is a slice of anthemic Heavy Rock punctuated by a guitar solo with more than a touch of Yngwie Malmsteen about it.

MIKE TRAMP – 'MUSEUM' *(Target)* Genre: Rock

Mike Tramp once sang of Rock 'n' Roll – "It ain't no fashion, it's a way of life". Very true, yet Tramp is one of those artists who has always managed to reinvent himself to fit in with the musical trends of the day. First coming to prominence in the glorious heyday of the eighties with the hugely successful White Lion, he rode out the Grunge storm with the excellent 'Freak Of Nature' and then in 1998 began releasing a string of solo albums in a more straightforward Rock 'n' Roll vein, culminating with the 'Rock 'N' Roll Circuz' releases. However, in a time when the likes of Ed Sheeran and Newton Faulkner can play to thousands of people armed with just an acoustic guitar, last year's 'Cobblestone Street' saw Tramp head back to his roots with an acoustic-based, Folk orientated release; it enabled him to tour the world completely on his own, selling his t-shirts from a cardboard box at the side of the stage at the end of the show.

So 'Museum' sees Tramp picking up where '...Street' left off. The thing is, while still acoustic-based, the songs on this release are anything but stripped back and feature some unusual arrangements and textures, along with a touch of Psychedelia in places, as if the freedom of being a solo artist that is unrestrained from a specific genre has opened up a whole new world of opportunity. First single 'Trust In Yourself' and 'Freedom' feature simplistic drum patterns, catchy piano melodies and subtle electric guitar textures, 'New World Coming' has elements of Led Zeppelin's acoustic stomp moments, 'Time For Me To Go' is a mid-tempo ballad constructed around a ticking clock rhythm with a hint of Country, 'Down South' brings forth a harder edge with a funky rhythm and 'Slave' continues in a similar vein with a cleverly constructed percussive pattern.

Yet there are still a number of Tramp's trademark ballads that reveal the true character in his voice and allow his Danish accent to shine through. 'Better' is a slow-burner built around a cascading piano melody that builds in mood, 'Commitment' a beautifully simple guitar and cello duet, 'And You Were Gone' is a tale of lost love and 'Mother' possibly his most heartfelt and revealing composition to date.

Once again Tramp opens up his emotions for the whole world to see, his lyrics telling the story of his life, his loves, and his family, while occasionally casting a caustic eye on society in general. This is where Mike Tramp wants to be now, is certainly where he appears to be the most comfortable and will most probably stay for the foreseeable future.

Ant Heeks

'Laney's Legion' is a joyous slice of Heavy Rock with a dash of Pop but enriched by the Chris Laney "sound"; take time to listen to the components and you'll realise how rich and complex the production is. It's an album that everyone should own for those moments when you just want a piece of classy, riffy Rock to brighten your day or energise your drive.

Helen Bradley-Owers

LOUD LION – 'DIE TOUGH' *(MelodicRock)* Genre: Hard Rock

This album really should be re-titled 'Die Tough: A Tribute to Def Leppard' as seven of the nine tracks on offer here are pure Leppard. Indeed, four of them really could be classed as remixes of several Leppard classics from the 'Hysteria' album, so close is their sound to the originals. Not that the band are trying to hide the fact as the first line of the sleeve notes states, "Loud Lion would like to thank Def Leppard, Mutt Lange and all the members of Def Leppard past and present."

All songs, dating back to 2010, were produced by Bleu McAuley (guitar, keyboards) and Jon Fields (bass) and written by McAuley and various other members of LL with his main partner in crime being Taylor Locke (guitar). The rest of the band is made up of Robbie Royce (who, unsurprisingly, has a remarkably similar sounding voice to Joe Elliot), guitarists Adam Ross, Maclaine Diemer and Allison Robertson and Dylan Halacy (drums). Further contributors include Pat Badger, Eric Barao and JK Northrup who fully re-mastered the album in L.A. The sound is good and true to Sheffield's finest but never quite matches the brilliance of the legendary Lange, but then, who does?

I think that if you are a fan of DL this will certainly put a smile on your face as all songs are brilliantly executed, even if, at times, some must come pretty close to infringing several copyright laws. The particular replica tracks in question are album opener 'Love Will Break Your Heart' ('Pour Some Sugar On Me'), 'Sunset Slip' ('Rocket'), 'Die Tuff' ('Love Bites') and the most blatant carbon copy 'Lion's Den' ('Women').

The three other Leppard influenced tracks, that loosely can be called originals, are my personal favourites; 'Lion Eyes', 'The Hills Have Eyes' (from the movie of the same name) and the awesome 'Dawn Of The Dead' with its phenomenal harmony vocals.

'Loud Lion Theme Song' is the first of two shred-fests from Ross (Rihanna's touring guitarist) that morphs briefly into an 'Hysteria'-like tribute before returning to the million notes a minute. The final track on the album is another shred-fest 'None More Fast' that would not been out of place on a Tenacious D album.

To be honest I think that it is very clever how Loud Lion have paid tribute to one of the all-time greatest Rock bands. So, the album might be as original as an Essex girl's handbag but if you are a fan of Def Leppard then it is certainly worth checking out. Let the feeding "frenzy" begin!

Mark Donnelly

MARSHALL X – 'BROKE, BUSTED & BLUE' *(Mother Of Pearl)* Genre: Blues/Soul

The Blues comes in various guises. It can be raw like an open wound or it can be smooth like molasses; this German band errs on the latter. Driven by guitarist and singer Marshall X, he's backed by an old-school rhythm section.

It's polite rather than rude Blues. At times it reminds me of the Bluesy tracks on Dire Straits 'On Every Street'; it's that kind of blues. The production is very good, it's got a warm feel, with a female backing singer to plump up choruses and although the guitars and vocals are naturally up-front and centre, the rhythm section is also as clear as a bell; each note and thrum audible.

The songs too are tastefully arranged and varied. There's a hint of the late great Willie De Ville on the Latin infused 'Suckers Ballad' and 'Love Is Blind'. The breezy 'Mainstreet Café' has a laid back J.J. Cale groove while 'The Pain Inside' has MX making his guitar sing and cry in a way that you could easily imagine BB King covering this tune in his inimitable way. 'Worn Out Shoes' rather cheekily pinches the riff from Eric Clapton's take on 'Crossroads'. When the band do decide to Rock out as on the Texas grind of 'Working On A Chain Gang' it still does it within the speed limits, never really screeching those tyres.

'Broke, Busted & Blue' is a well-made, likable Blues Rock album that is best listened to while sipping on a single glass of a good whisky rather than a record that you'll want to throw your head back a drain a cheap bottle of bourbon to.

Duncan Jamieson

MARTYR DE MONA – 'IMPERA' *(In At The Eye/Universal)* Genre: Progressive

A West Midlands based quartet who've fastidiously been creating something of a genuine buzz on the digital equivalent of the "ol' bush telegraph" of late – helped enormously by the fact that they've already supported the likes of Black Sabbath, Alter Bridge and Avenged Sevenfold, not to mention being there or thereabouts in a host of 'Best Newcomer' polls and awards – with the release of their sophomore full-length album 'Impera', you get the impression that Martyr De Mona may just be on the verge of something big.

Produced by Romesh Dodangoda (Bullet For My Valentine, Funeral For A Friend, Motorhead, etc.), 'Impera' is a thoroughly contemporary, nay "modern" sounding release, yet at the same time it has strong traditional Hard Rock/Heavy Metal sensibilities that hark back a generation or two. As you'd expect with a producer of such standing, the sonic properties of the album are pretty spectacular – to these ears Dodangoda is up there with the likes of Dennis Ward, Andy Sneap and Sascha Paeth – a humungous wall of sound delivered with absolute clarity, but 'Impera' is actually so much more than that.

Led from the front by the impassioned vocal roar of Louis Hale (complemented at times by some suitably histrionic harmonies courtesy of the rest of the band), the album kicks off on a melodramatic high with rousing opener 'Siege Mentality'. Building slowly Metallica style with an ever more persuasive string/piano intro, it gradually flares into life as the guitars kick in and the expertly channelled rage sends your senses reeling … a stunning way to open any album, and one that really wets the appetite!

A shift in gear marks the arrival of first single 'Influence & Persuasion', a truly incendiary statement of intent that really emphasises just how far the band have travelled from their "Post Grunge wannabes" roots in the last couple of years. Characterised by complex, constantly rotating riffs and rhythms (there's a really intense Progressive Metal feel a la classic Eldritch circa 'Seeds Of Rage'/'Headquake' permeating throughout), darkly twisted yet hauntingly memorable melodies and hooks; the likes of 'Reprisal', 'Sentiment', 'Nothing Sacred' and 'Suffer Unto Me' have all the hallmarks of future classics stamped on them in indelible ink.

Delivered with the classy, self-assured swagger of a band who can sense that their

MISS BEHAVIOUR – 'DOUBLE AGENT' *(AOR Heaven)* Genre: AOR

It's those Swedes again! Miss Behaviour returns with their third album 'Double Agent', the follow up to 2011's highly acclaimed opus 'Last Woman Standing'. If you liked the last album then you are going to love the new one. The production, which is colossal, was again handled by Daniel Gese with co-production from the band themselves. The album was recorded, mixed and mastered in Studio Lärkbacken and Realtime Recording Studios, Norrköping, Sweden.

MB have, once again, taken the essence of eighties Melodic Rock and brought it perfectly into the twenty-first century. Here is a band on top of their game and whom who are not afraid to give the keyboards equal billing with the guitars. There are twelve fantastic melodic songs on offer, all of which are of the highest quality, with two or three of them simply "knockin' it out of the park".

'On With The Show' kicks of the album and has all the hallmarks of classic eighties Melodic Rock; big guitars, big keyboards and huge vocals with a memorable chorus. The rest of the album continues very much in the same vein and what sets it apart from a lot of releases is its remarkable consistency throughout. The title track 'Double Agent' is the kind of song that most wish Bon Jovi could still write and record.

The rhythm section of bassist Nicky Bloom and drummer Magnum Jacobs keep it solid throughout, however it's vocalist Sebastian Roos, guitarist Erik Heikne and keyboard player Henrik Sproge who really take the spotlight, in equal measures, right through the whole album.

There is a nice variation of pace throughout, from the smooth ballad 'Cold Response', to the mid-tempo 'Magical Feeling', to the sing-along anthem 'Corporation Arms', to the ultra-catchy 'Love Reflector'. Straight ahead AOR songs 'Don't Let It End' and 'Midnight Runner' are both very reminiscent of fellow Swedes Treat. There are three tracks, however, that really raise the bar on this album; 'Edge Of The World' is heavy without ever compromising the melody, the near eight minute, keyboard heaven of 'The Cause Of Liberty' (one of the songs of the year) and 'Dancing With Danger' which is an object lesson, to any aspiring band, on how to write the perfect Melodic Rock song. The beautiful ballad 'Silver Rain' brings the album to a conclusion and I can guarantee that you will be hitting the repeat button over and over again.

I have only had this album for a week so I will need to live with it a bit longer but, initial impressions are, that it could rank up there with Treat's 'Coup De Grace' as one of the best Melodic Rock Albums of recent years; AOR with balls!

Mark Donnelly

time is drawing ever closer; if a senses tripping blend of Metallica, Sabbath, BFMV and Eldritch (amongst others) sounds like it might be up your street, then let 'Impera' shatter any misguided preconceptions that might still linger about the state of the scene today.

From chaos there must ultimately come order, and on the strength of this release Martyr De Mona seem perfectly poised to lead the way…

Dave Cockett

MASTODON – 'ONCE MORE ROUND THE SUN' *(Reprise)* Genre: Heavy Metal

Mastodon first came to my attention with their 2004 'Leviathan' album; the heavy uncompromising riffs and sheer quality of the songs on that release was something that appealed to me and I've been a fan of the band ever since. Forward now to 2014 and we find Mastodon returning to the music scene with the majestic brutality of 'Once More Round The Sun', an album that takes no prisoners with its hard-nosed approach to Rock music. The riffs that are prevalent throughout the album blister your skin with their intensity and the pounding drums and bass threaten to deafen you and shake the glass from your window panes when you play the album LOUD. Yet what is still amazing about this band and its music is the fact that as heavy as the songs are, they are also so good; that their intense, dramatic and of course overblown nature works so well that when you're listening to 'Once…' you seem to lose yourself completely in the album's musical splendour.

Give 'Tread Lightly', 'High Road' (with its riff that Black Sabbath would have loved to have written), 'Chimes At Midnight', the monster Rockfest of 'Asleep In The Deep', 'Halloween' and the astonishingly complex epic that is 'Diamond In The Witch House' a few minutes of your time and soon you'll discover for yourself, one of the great Metal bands working today. I must also give a massive thumbs up to two other people, firstly Nick Raskulinecz (Rush/Alice In Chains) whose production has made this whole album sound truly amazing and a joy to listen to, and secondly to cover artist Skinner whose weird Chinese/India influenced Psychedelic cover art brings another element of quality to the whole 'Once…' package.

As bands and their music go, Mastodon are heavy (H) but they temper this with great melodies and musicianship that is second to none and 'Once More Round The Sun' is another feather in their collective caps. Another winner from messers Troy Sanders, Brent Hinds, Bill Kelliher and Brann Dailor... the gentlemen from Atlanta, Georgia known as Mastodon; and a must buy for lovers of the heavier stuff.

Ian Johnson

MIKE CAMPESE – 'CHAMELEON' *(Independent)* Genre: Instrumental

As someone who plays guitar, I am always up for listening to a guitar instrumental album. And I have sat with the best; Steve Vai, Uli Jon Roth, and Joe Satriani has even made me a cup of tea. I do appreciate however, that it can be an acquired taste, and not everyone can sit and listen to twiddle, or "shred" as it's better known by those who like it, for up to an hour.

Now I can listen to some of this, up to a point, but after a bit it gets a little too much. The difference between this and the stuff that the aforementioned guitarists do is, when I listen to it I can hum it, or, at least, something remains in my memory. Unfortunately, with Mike Campese's music, that doesn't happen because there are so many notes per second my brain does not compute that much information.

Fair enough, I appreciate that there is some skill and talent involved in this, but the bigger talent in music is coming up with a memorable melody, and that doesn't happen here. To be fair, Campese does give it a good go, and almost succeeds on the second track 'Chameleon,' where he bases the track around a neat sequence of notes, and the fourth track 'She Burnt The House Down,' which is far more Blues based and consequently slower. However, he still plays sections where there's too much to take in.

Other than this I can't remember much about it. In fact, the other tracks on here with lyrics, 'Funky Monkey Man' ("There's a man they call monkey man, He swings from the trees and he is the funkiest monkey around, He loves to eat bananas and anything he sees, And all the other monkeys follow him around, 'Cause he is the funky monkey man" – Urrgh!) and 'Firefly In A Bottle' have no real vocal melody to them at all, and maybe that's down to the fact that as a guitarist, Campese is not a singer.

A few less notes and a little more variety wouldn't have gone amiss.

Andy Brailsford

MOSTLY AUTUMN – 'DRESSED IN VOICES' *(Mostly Autumn)* Genre: Rock

I have followed the fortunes of Mostly Autumn closely for the last twelve years and have every album, so when I played 'Dressed In Voices' for the first time, I was quite surprised. It was different… still clearly MA… yet different.

The band has touched on the concept idea before, but never to this extent and never embedded in a concept so thematically tragic and harrowing… the taking of someone's life and its consequences. 'Saturday Night' sets the scene and the song culminates in a death by shooting. Each subsequent piece of music, from 'Not Yours To Take' to 'Box Of Tears', is an analysis of the effect the death has on the family of the deceased and also the protagonist.

In the past MA records have tended to be immediate and the melodies have resonated long after the first play. The impact 'Dressed…' makes is gradual, yet no less satisfying, and the reflective mood throughout is reminiscent of Pink Floyd's 'The Final Cut'. When I spoke to band leader Bryan Josh about the album's creation, he outlined how most of the material was composed on keyboards. That creation process has been carried forward and is highlighted by the part Iain Jennings plays. His piano and keyboards to a large extent dictate the sound, driving the songs and dominating at times, emphasizing the emotional subject matter. Olivia Sparnenn-Josh's performance is once again electrifying. Her hypnotic vocals convey how fragile life is and just how delicate a hold everyone has day by day. Josh's involvement seems restrained compared to previous albums, indicating that the songs are the key and not just the medium to massage an ego. His vocals take a backseat to those of Sparnenn-Josh and his solo guitar work compliments rather than being a prominent feature. When he does cut loose, such as during the title track and 'The Library', it is never at the expense of the song or just a blur of notes.

'Dressed In Voices' contains some beautiful musical passages incorporating a number of styles and the thoughtful lyrics that help conjure up some sombre yet hopeful mental images. Each song has the quality to stand on its own merits as well as being integral to the album as a whole. It represents a unique listening experience that warrants repeated plays and I can't wait to catch the album played live in its entirety when the band's extended tour reaches St. Helens in October.

Dave Bott

NEAL MORSE – 'SONGS FROM NOVEMBER' *(InsideOut)* Genre: Progressive

Neal Morse is rightly lauded as a member of current Prog Royalty thanks to his considerable body of work with Spock's Beard, Transatlantic and his many epic solo albums. It's maybe less well known that prior to his departure from SB, he released two solo albums in a different style; what you'd term singer/song-writer. Concise songs in length and arrangement, these were excellent albums and it's been amazing to me that they've never featured in his set.

After a thirteen year gap (ignoring the Dylan-esque and strongly religious album 'Songs From The Highway' from 2007) he's finally produced another album in this genre and it's certainly been worth the wait. Morse likens the album to one made by Jackson Browne or Graham Nash but the influences that come through most to me are Billy Joel, The Eagles, America and Venice.

Opening number 'Whatever Days' bounds along in a jaunty manner, brass and saxophone accompaniment from Jim Hoke reinforcing the Joel comparison. 'Heaven Smiled' is an acoustic ballad typically Morse in style and creation, albeit the female backing vocals from the McCrary Sisters lends both a Gospel and Pink Floyd ('The Great Gig in the Sky') feel to proceedings.

'Flowers In A Vase' has a hint of Country to it; like everything else here the melody is so strong that it gets into your head and stays there. Simply piano, steel guitar and brushed drums it's gentle but effective and the harmony vocals are a delight. 'Love Shot An Arrow' features a very effective string arrangement from Chris Carmichael with the female backing vocals to the fore on the catchy chorus.

The equally upbeat 'Song For The Free' sees Morse adopting a less familiar format; it makes me think of a cross between Matchbox 20 and Train. 'Tell Me Annabelle' was written when Morse was in his twenties and just serves to demonstrate he was a skilful song-writer even then.

The lovely violin intro to 'My Time Of Dying' provides a suitably plaintive feel and evokes Kansas while the vocals on the chorus are redolent of both America and Venice. 'Daddy's Daughter' could have been soppy but just manages to avoid that fate... again, the chorus is infectious. 'Wear The Chains' has the vibe of a section you'd hear as part of one of his Prog epics. The album closes with 'The Way Of Love' with verses that again bring forth Joel comparisons. It's a bit repetitive for my taste and not being a big fan of a brass section, it leaves a slight feeling of ending on a low.

That said Morse shows his versatility and prowess as both a performer and writer.

Gary Marshall

NEOPERA – 'DESTINED WAYS' *(earMUSIC)* Genre: Symphonic Metal

Now, being totally honest – upon the first few listens of this debut, I struggled and turned away! There were some elements I really liked but others left me somewhat cold. However, there was something that kept me going back – and I am certainly glad that I did!

'Destined Ways' is the debut album for Neopera, a six-piece out of Germany that successfully combines Progressive Hard Rock with Symphonic/Operatic overtones and straight Metal undertones. Lead guitarist Jorn Schubert (Dark Age) leads this serious sextet to the upper echelons of a Rock Opera! With varied vocal stylings and vocalists, industrial

strength harmonies, each covering the full spectrum of voice, this work propels the listener ever deeper. The instrumentation works very much in the same way; creating musical movements that match the operatic vocalisations and brings us a heaviness seldom heard.

'Destined...' is a complete melodic work, and must be listened to in that way – no singular piece really stands alone – although masterful each, they are joined together. The story builds from one to another, and the plot progresses just like it would in a well written movie. Schubert, along with his musical mates including Dirk Schlachter (Gamma Ray – bass), Nina Jiers (vocals) and Thorsten Schuck (vocals), have created a unique interpretation of a Neo-Classical modern Rock Opera. It is a piece of work that is also elevated by Mikis Trimborn on guitar and Andre Schumann (Dark Age) bringing in that "oh!" so powerful drumming. This is an album that is ever so deep and complicated, but at the same time refreshing! As I stated at the start of this review… it does take several listens before the brilliance of the composers is evident… but it is there, and most likely why I just had to keep going back!

Neopera's first is a strapping one, and a release that should echo for a very long time, delighting Gothic Operatic Rock lovers and having them yearn for more!

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

NERONIA – 'LIMNOTAPES' *(Housemaster)* Genre: Progressive

It's fatal to judge an album on a single listen. If that had happened in the past then such gems as Rush's classic '2112' and Dream Theater's 'When Dream And Day Unite' may well have ended up on the "to flog pile". Thankfully common sense prevailed and repeated listens came up trumps with a lifetime of listening pleasure.

'Limnotapes' by Germany's Neronia very nearly ended up on that dreaded pile. On first listen, the flat, almost demo like production, seemed to hint at very little and by the end of the first listen the initial view was not great.

In the essence of fairness and to give a reasoned objective review at least two more spins were needed. On the second play, little sections began to reveal themselves from the shimmering synths of 'Sleep My Child' to the wonderful acoustic intro to 'Cloud Of Tears'. There was certainly something that wasn't present on the first listen.

Subsequent listens yielded more. Michael Stein's reserved keyboards create an atmospheric ambience that enhance rather than dominate with some simple yet effective solos built more on melody than flash. Check out the delicious solo towards the mid-point of 'Journey's End' which lays the ground perfectly for a soaring climax from guitarist Rudiger Zaczyk. Vocalist Falk Ullmann's voice may be something of an acquired taste but he can certainly carry a decent melody or two.

Positioned somewhere between Charlie Dominici period Dream Theater and the long lost House Of Spirits, Neronia's brand of Prog Metal may not be perfect but certainly has potential and with a top class producer and engineer at the helm they may well take some good ideas and turn them into great ones.

Mick Burgess

NIVA – 'INCREMENTAL IV' *(AOR Heaven)* Genre: AOR

Tony Niva impressed a lot of people, me included, with last year's 'Magnitude' album, the former Swedish Erotica and Axia man showing that he has a real head for inoffensive, Melodic Rock in the TNT/Journey vein. Technically, this is his fourth album under his own name (the first way back in 1994), but to be honest the first two aren't exactly easy to track down. Maybe this fact explains the 'IV' in the title, as there's certainly no other explanation I can work out.

It's fair to say that if you enjoyed 'Magnitude' then you will certainly enjoy the follow up. Niva has hit on a winning formula and is happy to run with it. The first two tracks, 'Don't You Know' and 'Crush' are perfect openers, upbeat and stirring, melodic and beautifully put together. Niva's vocals remind me very much of classic Tony Harnell, with these tracks containing the energy and fluidity of classic TNT. For some reason there's a song called 'Magnitude', which surely should have been on the last album?!

Although a few of the tracks are a little "middle of the road", there's nothing else that can be said in a negative context about 'Incremental IV'. It's a great summer album, guaranteed to put a smile on the face of any AOR fan. Seriously, tracks like 'Play The Game' or 'Lost & Found' are so infectious and full of life it's impossible not to love them. Tony Niva has succeeded for the second time in a row with this one, and if you like a bit of late 1980s inspired, high pitched AOR with widdly guitars (that's a genre, right?) then this is a must.

Alan Holloway

O'REGAN – 'TEMPTATION' *(ZRecords)* Genre: Melodic Rock

Conceived around mastermind Vince O'Regan (Legion), the O'Regan project follows the same formula as Frédéric Slama's AOR, Voices of Rock etc. And it seems, we're still not tired of this type of scheme – especially, if the recordings result in a portion of high quality Melodic Rock! The project's album 'Temptation' (which was released in July) features Legion's axe man teaming up with the likes of Bob Catley (Magnum), Paul Sabu (Only Child, Kidd Glove) and regular cohort Phil Vincent (Legion), with Legion's 'V'-era line-up responsible for the instrumental background.

The album starts with 'Temptation', a slightly heavier Rock track sung by the impeccable Bob Catley. Next up are 'Something To Believe In', which features a vocal contribution from Paul Sabu, and the keyboard-driven 'Woman' with Simon Abbotts (Pulse) behind the microphone. And although there's nothing bad about these tracks, it gets even better the further you progress. What 'Restless Heart' brings to mind is mostly ballad-esque Foreigner in their 1980s prime. Sung again by Catley, it's a perfectly crafted power ballad, reaching a wonderful climax with the brilliant guitar solo. With the Pomp Rock gem 'Crash And Burn' (featuring vocals from Vega's Nick Workman, O'Regan's former Eden colleague), this time machine takes the listener back thirty years yet keeps going full throttle.

A bit feistier, yet still ultra-melodic, is 'Slave To The System', with Legion's Vincent taking over the microphone. Sabu's excellent performance in the bombastic 'Heroes In The Night' reminds me of some of the singer's best work. Next is 'Neon Lights' with it's the eerie and lengthy intro; a slightly heavier song with distinct Progressive flavours but also gravitating towards a contemporary Rock sound. Workman also provides vocals on this one and, however fantastic it is on its own, it sounds a bit odd when compared with the previous tracks. O'Regan returns to Melodic Rock simplicity with the guitar-laden 'Time Stands Still', once again sung by Vincent. The majestic 'Fire In The Sky' is a genuine grand finale to the album, as Rick Chase (ex-Alibi) delivers some emotionally laden vocals against a sombre, ballad-esque musical background.

MOONLAND – 'MOONLAND' *(Frontiers)* Genre: AOR

I have to admit I was very excited about the Moonland project when Frontiers announced it as I'm a big fan of vocalist Lenna Kuurmaa and her time with Pop Rockers Vanilla Ninja. Moonland sees Kuurmaa work very closely with producer Alessandro Del Vecchio and it is very much an album of pure AOR. Del Vecchio also adds a few of his own songs to the mix as well as some truly amazing piano and keyboard moments; a truly impressive performance from the ever reliable keyboardist.

Obviously given my musical taste hearing Kuurmaa sing on a pure AOR album was the stuff dreams are made of. Although I'm already a fan, I think these songs and this style really showcase what a truly awesome vocalist she is, as these songs stretch and expose her range far more than I've heard previously. I'm totally in awe of her performances on this album; she has such a warm and extremely emotive voice that frequently gives me tingles, she puts me a little in mind of Sue Willets of Dante Fox at times for her passionate delivery.

For me this is an almost perfect slice of pure AOR, all the songs have lush arrangements and beautiful musical landscapes which complement Kuurmaa's heartfelt vocals perfectly. I fell in love with this album instantly and I think a lot of that is down to the emotional connection I quickly made with the songs and Kuurmaa's beautiful voice. Sometimes projects can see singers been detached from the lyrics and the emotional drive of the melodies of songs they haven't written, but Kuurmaa totally gets what this album is about and seemingly pours her heart and soul into every word and melody.

There is a very warm and beautiful feel to this album as a whole and the emotive depth just makes it tick all the right boxes for me. There are lots of unforgettable vocal melodies, pumping keyboards, driven hook fuelled guitars that combine to make some really intense and passionate tunes that make a lasting impression. Every track has something that makes it stand out clearly in my mind; I love immersing myself into the emotional drive of the unforgettable 'Out Of Reach', 'Over Me' and the ballad 'Live And Let Go' which just sees Kuurmaa oozing raw emotion.

If you're a fan of traditional sounding pure AOR you should love this, especially if bands like Dante Fox and Romeo's Daughter float your boat! Here's hoping Kuurmaa continues to make Rock music following this stellar performance that should make her deservedly a new star in the world of AOR. I love this album, you will too.

Paul Woodward

Apart from the star-studded line-up, probably the biggest asset to 'Temptation' is that this release follows the "no fillers, all killers" rule – but not at the cost of versatility. It's simply Melodic Rock of extraordinary quality, and even though 2014 has been very gracious to the genre so far, this album will probably remain amongst this year's best.

Alexandra Mrozowska

PARTY ANIMALS – 'LIGHT A FAN COOL' *(Street Symphonies)* Genre: Hard Rock

No matter how eager we are to pretend we're a bunch of sophisticated listeners who only find pleasure in twenty-minute long suites that are rich in sublime instrumental wizardry – everyone sometimes needs to indulge themselves and start the day with the easily digestible dose of Rock 'n' Roll simplicity. Bands such as Poison made thousands of dollars on such moments of weakness didn't they? And if throwing a wild 1980s-themed party, you'll need a suitable compilation of sex, drugs and Rock 'n' Roll anthems too. That's where bands like Party Animals come in handy. This Female-Fronted Italian quartet surely knows how to Rock and their debut album 'Light A Fan Cool' is clear proof of this.

The first track 'Fuck You Baby' introduces the listener to the band's trademark sound – testosterone-fuelled, sleazy guitar riffs and wild co-ed rhythm section against the feisty vocals of a female singer Andreina. If you ever wondered what a potential love child of Vince Neil and Lee Aaron could have sounded like – she might be the answer. 'Light...' is comprised of ten songs, each of them being clichéd and predictable but nevertheless having more of a brain-boosting effect than a strong morning coffee. Just listen to the second song 'Damned Road' with a furious instrumental interlude preceding a blistering guitar solo or the lustful, fast-paced 'I Wanna Get It All'. You can also blast the band's self-titled song 'Party Animals' in your car, on the way to work – all these rough riffs and noisy group chanting should keep you awake even in the middle of the most awful traffic jam.

Along with the simplicity and straightforwardness of the lyrics about (guess what) sex, parties and excessive alcohol consumption, 'Light A Fan Cool' is sleaze-infused contemporary Hard Rock at its best. And although it's hard to dub the band's hometown Udine, Italy "the new Sunset Strip", these Italian hedonists do their best to make us believe they've been conceived, born and raised somewhere in the back of the Whiskey A Go-Go (and well, also that the guys from Mötley Crüe contributed at least in part to the conception). If you're looking for a good-time Sleaze Rock party album and don't feel like pondering upon the meaning of life other than contemplating a worn-out "sex, drugs and Rock 'n' Roll" thing, Party Animals are the band I'm more than happy to suggest you check out.

Alexandra Mrozowska

PATRIZIA – 'ROCK THE THRONE' *(Independent)* Genre: Symphonic Metal

This album is amazing and totally unique. But also, in some respects, it's really quite bonkers. It shouldn't actually exist… in this compartmentalised, musical pigeon holing world we've always known.

I think I've just discovered a new genre that might make me dispense with my entire musical collection and start from scratch again… just because of Patrizia. Actually, someone stop me before I do. No, really!

Italian born, Canadian raised and Toronto based Patrizia is, in a nutshell, a "Rock Opera

Goddess!" She's been variously described as the "female Freddie Mercury" and "Canada's next sensation" but what she really is, is utterly fascinating! She's a musical visionary by melding Opera, Rock, Metal and Classical into one heck of a creative hot pot – a quite stunning vocalist, and theatrically entertaining.

Patrizia is described as "a four octave dramatic coloratura Soprano" and her voice is equally on a par with the legendary Maria Callas or the more recent Operatic sopranos like Sarah Brightman, Katherine Jenkins, Natalie Dessay, Cheryl Studer and Anna Netrebko amongst many others.

'Rock The Throne', her third album, continues the theme of Rock covers and her own interpretations of famous classical pieces and Operas. The Cranberries' 'Zombie' is one of her favourite songs as she identifies with its anti-war sentiment. As the original key was too low Patrizia re-arranged it to suit a Rocked up, gritty version sung with verve and bile as she eschews the over-the-top Operatic approach. 'Radiohead's 'Creep' is a song that most represents her – recognizing what and who she is, featuring an orchestral intro before the heavy guitar and dramatic drums cut in. Again, she reigns in the Operatic to sing in a softer Soprano voice. Queen's 'The Show Must Go On' is made for Patrizia but it's a restrained approach amongst the piano-led beginning and flamenco guitar, however, her voice is pitch perfect and she shows amazing sustain on several notes.

Several originals are aired with a quirky Pop Rock 'I Won't Stop Believin" which won a Toronto award and the Metalised 'On The Brink' with Patrizia's voice dominating.

However, her true Soprano range is mesmerizing as she tackles Bizet's 'Habanera (aria)' from the Opera 'Carmen'. Originally scored for a Mezzo-Soprano, Patrizia over dramatizes with sped up musical dramatics and echo effects whilst simultaneously alternating in Italian and French, sounding like a mash-up between Queen and "Rocky Horror". Elsewhere she tackles Puccini's 'Vissi D'Arte' from the Opera 'Tosca' (sung in Italian) and adds her own interpretation with English lyrics to Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata' and Carl Orff's internationally famous 'O Fortuna' from his cantata 'Carmina Burana'.

Dazzlingly beautiful to the point where you don't wish to listen to anything other than this album on repeat play.

Carl Buxton

PAUL GILBERT – 'STONE PUSHING UPHILL MAN' *(Provogue)* Genre: Instrumental

As a die-hard Mr. Big fan I've spent a lot of time (and money!) investigating each member's solo material to continue to feed my MB fix. Paul Gilbert kicked his solo career off in 1998 with 'King Of Clubs', a quirky collection of Pop-Rock tunes with big melodies. Those expecting Gilbert to shred were seriously disappointed, but for me, I loved his catchy song-writing. They only got better, with 'Flying Dog' and 'Alligator Farm' having some great moments, before he released my favourite to date, 'Burning Organ' in 2002.

After 2005's 'Space Ship One', Gilbert moved away from the formula of Rock vocal songs, nestled next to one or two instrumentals per record, to full blown instrumental albums. While the playing was high caliber, I find Rock instrumental records a bit tedious and yearn for a singer. 2012's 'Vibrato' saw Gilbert return to singing, although the record was more of a 50/50 split between vocal and instrumental songs.

The oddly titled 'Stone Pushing Uphill Man' is a very different beast. Gilbert has elected to cover some songs by his favourite acts, but he has decided to perform the vocal lines on guitar, working very hard to get the phrasing as close to the original as possible. An ambitious idea, I had my doubts, but the cover of Loverboy's 'Working For The Weekend' kicks things off and sounds really good. The upbeat energy is there, as are Gilbert's trademark tones, and the vocal melody on guitar is a tribute to Gilbert's mastery of his instrument. Better still is the amazing rendition of Aerosmith's 'Back In The Saddle', where Gilbert replicate's Steven Tyler's notes so well, I happily sang along despite no vocalist being present.

The effort Gilbert has gone to make his guitar "sing" is phenomenal, his use of tone, the way he's played the notes thinking as a singer rather than a guitarist, makes this a highly unusual and engaging album. From the Funk of James Brown's 'I Got The Feelin" to Elton John's 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road', Gilbert spans genre after genre and nails them all. With tracks by The Police, The Beatles and k.d. lang, interspersed with original material like 'Shock Absorber', it's an album which feels like Gilbert is doing exactly what he wants to do.

The title track closes the album and is the only song which does feature a real vocal. Gilbert steps up and delivers it well, rounding things off nicely. Normally guitar instrumental albums are a bit tiresome for me, but this one is a breath of fresh air. Guitar worshippers and skeptics alike should get a real kick out of it.

James Gaden

PHILIP SAYCE – 'INFLUENCE' *(Provogue)* Genre: Blues/Soul

Guitarist Philip Sayce has garnered a fair amount of respect in the industry for his ability as a guitarist, notable for landing gigs with Uncle Kracker and Melissa Etheridge. He popped up at Jeff Healey's live performance at Montreux in 1999 and performed on Jimmy Barnes' 'Double Happiness' album. However, Sayce's new album 'Influence' will not only reinforce people's opinion of him as a guitarist, it will also make people sit up and take notice of him as an artist, writer and vocalist. Taking a handful of covers which shaped him as an artist, and meshing them with a collection of originals written by himself and producer Dave Cobb, Sayce's new album twists and turns with you never knowing what's around the next corner.

The noisy but brilliant take on the originally *A Capella* 'Tom Devil' opens proceedings, with the rhythm section boasting the full Cobb sound, and the crunching guitar laid on top. It's a grower, unlike the blistering 'Out Of My Mind' which fuses the Jimi Hendrix vibe of 'Fire' with a Stevie Salas approach. It's a scorching track, preceding the fantastic, Funky rendition of Little Feat's 'Sailing Shoes'. Sayce absolutely nails this, both vocally and instrumentally, while the bouncing 'I'm Going Home' is packed with energy and pace.

It's an all encompassing record, from the dreamy original 'Fade Into You' to the Blues workout 'Blues Ain't Nothin' But A Good Woman On Your Mind' which sees Sayce firmly in Joe Bonamassa territory. A sublime, wah-wah laden take on Little Richard's 'Green Power' has Sayce excelling once again, while 'Easy On The Eyes' embraces more of the Hendrix influence to the fore.

The old school production sound from Cobb, which gives the record the warmth and depth which benefitted Rival Sons and California Breed, along with Sayce's excellent playing, writing and vocals, make this a diverse and hugely entertaining album. Well worth checking out.

James Gaden

PROGMIUM – 'PROJECT DIAGNOSIS' *(Project Diagnosis Foundation)* Genre: Progressive

Passed onto me by our Reviews Editor as he thought it would be something I might like, the very grand sounding Progmium are a quartet put together by Tim Surkovich to record music to the words that he was writing after being diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. Hailing from Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania, singer Randy Sciarrillo, bassist Rob Cunningham, drummer/keyboard player Dave Shaffer and guitarist/keyboard player J. Luis Morales have done a good job of transferring Surkovich's understandable mood swings into a Progressive Metal rollercoaster ride.

At its best 'Project Diagnosis' hints at Dream Theater, Pink Floyd and Fates Warning, with all the time and tempo changes we've come to expect from the genre. However, a flat production, an overdose of sombreness and Sciarrillo's sometimes ordinary delivery also remind me of bands like Dead Soul Tribe, Tiles and a few others who had undoubted talent but never quite managed to make an album that had good songs all the way through. Having said that, the slow and moody 'Numb', the powerful 'Denial' and the lengthy tangle of riffs and drum rolls that is 'The Beast Within' are most enjoyable.

Progmium suffer the most when they try to Rock out, simply because the production and the vocals can't adequately convey the intensity needed, but the more low-key ballad 'Glimmer Of Hope', the clever 'As I Am' and the brooding atmospherics of 'Take Up The Fight!' are good examples of quality song-writing.

It's been hard not to give this album a better review, especially as seventy-five per cent of the proceeds go to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, and if it opens some eyes and raises money and awareness, then it'll have done its job. Available from the band's website (www.progmium.com), the dark music and even darker subject matter may well appeal to some.

Phil Ashcroft

RADIO MOSCOW – 'MAGICAL DIRT' *(Alive)* Genre: Rock

Not to be confused with Brian Tatler's outfit formed following the demise of Diamond Head, Radio Moscow is the brainchild of multi-instrumentalist Parker Griggs. Formed in 2003 in Iowa, 'Magical Dirt' is the bands fourth studio album or fifth if you include their odds and sods demo collection '3 & 3 Quarters' released a couple of years back.

Adopting the classic Power Trio approach, 'Magical...' pays homage to the likes of Cream and Blue Cheer with heavy groove based riffs with a genuine 1970s feel. While Griggs takes centre stage with some tremendous riffs and screaming solos which would give Frank Marino a run for his money, drummer Paul Marrone must also take a bow with some of the most frantic drumming this side of Mitch Mitchell and Keith Moon.

'So Alone' and 'Death Of A Queen' Rock hard, while 'Sweet Lil' Thing' and 'Stinging' have more of a Delta Blues vibe with Griggs delivering some fine, grimy slide guitar. RM sound on this album like the sort of band that would be ferocious live, cutting loose and going off on extended jams. That feel is captured on this album but you can just tell that it's in a sweaty club where these guys really break free.

The retro 1970s style certainly seems to be growing in popularity and maybe it just feels more authentic and devoid of over production that many modern albums generally suffer from. With Rival Sons, Monster Truck and Graveyard all making waves, it may be just the right time for Radio Moscow to step forward and stake their claim and with 'Magical Dirt', they may have the album to do just that.

Mick Burgess

PSYCRENCE – 'A FRAIL DECEPTION' *(Steel Gallery)* Genre: Progressive

Those who know me best know of my affinity to purchase an album based solely on the artwork, song names, or even on a whim wondering what a band with such a name sounds like. Scoff at me they sometimes do, but when I am able to show them a band such as the one we are about to talk about here, it is me who gets the last laugh. So…. ha-ha, bite me!

Such was the case when I purchased this, 'A Frail Deception', the debut from Greece based Psycrence; and what a great choice I made, for this was money well spent. The incredible keyboard work, the chugging power chords, the lush melodies, the overall heaviness, and the vocal harmonies, all of which are what give these tracks depth, passion and melody. It is a great thing when a band can play with such vigor on one track ('Moral Decay'), then on the next showcase the ability to put touches of the downfallen and morose ('Hold Close The Flame). With the Progressive heaviness of the exceptional Serenity, the heavy guitars of Sandalinas, and the lushness of the always amazing Seven Kingdoms, Psycrence comes across as sheer Progressive Metal faultlessness.

The songs come across as tight, with every inch of every musical bar used to its fullest; the song-writer taking full advantage of the short time of a musical bar to add another layer of notes, more layers of guitars, a keyboard to fill in a certain spot, and the bass and drums added in where needed. It is safe to say the songs are crafted much like a house is built. The foundation of bass and drums, the guitars and keyboards contain the music within a certain space, much like the walls, and the voices add that cover, so together the music comes across all nicely fit within said musical bars. Because of that, just praise is given, for these songs are amazingly well written. As the final track fades away, the listener is left breathless and feels like he has just had his Metal ass kicked. And what happens then is a new favourite band is made.

Brace yourself, and listen to the simply fantastic 'Reflection', the layered guitars of 'Subconscious Eyes', the incredible bass that is heard on 'Distance', the drums of 'Forced Evolution' and the synthesizers and piano are just jaw dropping on the closing track 'Lights.'

What a solid release this is. In perfect doses, all the instruments bombard their way toward the listener, hell bent on filling his heart, mind and soul with a collection of Progressive Metal that needs to be heard. In summary, this is an unbelievable, head tuning Progressive Metal release.

Franco Cerchiari

RIVAL SONS – 'GREAT WESTERN VALKYRIE' *(Earache)* Genre: Rock

Much like The Answer, I had always pigeonholed the Rival Sons as Retro Rock – good musicians with their Rock 'n' Roll hearts in the right place even if they are somewhat musically predictable. While I fear The Answer are likely to fall to the wayside, RS on the other hand look set for the long term path of glory.

This release has the band not quite reinventing themselves, but reaching deeper inside and pulling out something strikingly accomplished. 'Electric Man' is cut from the same cloth as classic Led Zeppelin, with singer Jay Buchanan screaming out the lyrics with true gusto, whilst the fluid guitar of Scott Holiday entwines around the vocals like a sonic blast. Each song takes on a different mood, and 'Good Luck' is a huge slice of soulful sixties Rock (you can almost smell the patchouli oil).

'Secret' is a straight-ahead Rocker, reminiscent of the bands earlier material, whereas 'Good Things' is a truly seductive slice of genius; it has smooth vocals which beg you to get up and dance and it plays like a song you might have heard from The Zombies. The spirit of John Bonham is paid homage to in the drum intro of 'Open My Eyes'. Holiday is given free rein to show you that "less is more" in the guitar department.

Just when you think you have the RS sound nailed down, the guys throw you a curve ball like 'Rich And The Poor'; mysterious and macabre, with beautiful and seductive lyrics that send your senses elsewhere. The softest moment is saved for 'Where I've Been', which plays like a Baptist song of prayer. 'Destination On Course' (a fitting song title) is a slow burner that never loses focus, and brings to a close what should be a very important release for this band.

Rival Sons remind me why I fell in love with music, and I think if you give them the chance, they will remind you too.

Ray Paul

RAGE OF ROMANCE – 'RAGE OF ROMANCE' *(Steel Gallery)* Genre: Power Metal

Hailing from Greece, this young assembling (only four years old) fuses together Neo-Classical and Progressive styles with a powerful razor-sharp musical attack. Founded by Windfall members Iraklis & Leonidas Deligiorgis, Rage Of Romance deliver a rich bed of Progressive and atmospheric movements that certainly Rock and soar!

ROR are fronted by Vicky Psarakis (E.V.E.) whose vocals are both sweet and powerful and will undoubtedly attract comparisons to the likes of Nightwish, Epica and other such like bands, but these comparisons only serve as guide posts. ROR differs from their contemporaries in that their music is sharper, filled with naked power and aggressive. Perhaps this is due to the founding members coming out of a Power Metal outfit.

In addition to the siren like vocals of Psarakis, another Windfall member has joined the bands ranks with Kostas Giannikopoulos bringing his talents on keyboards to the fore. Rounding out this six-piece is Michael Tiko on guitar, and drummer Nick Tsiligoudis. Laying down the riveting bed of music are, of course, the two founding brothers but it is not just about them and, together, this group create a commanding set of musical currents that will inspire music lovers the world over!

On this debut, ROR ascertain in very definite terms that they are an emerging presence and will continue to be a presence for some time giving us towering musical forays that are potent, melodic and hard driving as well as being epic in proportion in a live setting. Although only eight tracks deep, this album will hold your attention throughout – so immense is this ocean of Symphonic expressions that it will become a classic experience! Experience for yourselves the Rage Of Romance.

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

RAINBOWS ARE FREE – 'WAVES AHEAD OF THE OCEAN' *(Guestroom)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

This is the second studio album from Oklahoma's Rainbows Are Free, so kick back, light a fat one and listen to 'Speed God And The Rise Of The Motherfuckers From A Place Beyond Hell' (certainly an early contender for "Most Outrageous Song Title 2014" – Ed). The song takes you on a trip into a stratospheric zone, the likes you won't have heard since Hawkwind released 'Space Ritual'.

The short but sweet 'The Botanist' is a crazy, Doom-laden head banger, and the band tap into a bygone era of music that seems to be spawning new bands and faithful fans each year.

Title track 'Waves Ahead Of The Ocean' has seven-foot singer Brandon Kistler delivering a classic orgy of screeching vocals, while guitar player Richie Tarver delivers Blues-soaked chords of destruction.

We take an esoteric corridor for 'Sonic Demon', as the song twists and turns until it bursts into iron slabs of Metal mayhem. After that dazzling display of power, the band take things down a step, and the result is 'Cadillac'; slow and twisted Blues when needed, with a seductive edge.

A taste of Southern Rock is on the menu and served up in 'Snake Bitten By Love', a more conventional Rocker that keeps the album sounding fresh. The darkened tones of 'Burn And Die' remind me of some of the Masters of Reality's material - which is no bad thing in my book.

Finishing with 'Comet', Rainbows Are Free led us on a trail into forbidden territory. Foreboding vocals and droning guitars produce a hypnotic tone as the song divides into various musical parts, before climaxing into a vibrant mass of musical emotion.

Ray Paul

RAVENSCRY – 'THE ATTRACTION OF OPPOSITES' *(Code 7/Revalve)* Genre: Progressive

The Reviews Ed and I have a bit of a secret; we're both lovers of Female-Fronted Gothic and Symphonic Metal bands. So each issue he tries to slip me at least one of those bands to me for review (though he does seem to go and interview a lot of these young Ladies himself? [that's a slanderous accusation...hang on... – Ed]).

This month then I find myself in the pleasant company of Italian Symphonic Metallers Ravenscry whose second album 'The Attraction Of Opposites' deals with the dualism of reality and the complex nature of conflict, opposing points of view and attraction. Ravenscry, as you might be able tell from that short description of their music, don't shy away from the darker side of life.

Though the darkness in the music is tempered and complimented by the lighter yet still powerful vocals of the band's singer Giulia Stefani, whose ethereal stylings bring to life the clever lyrics and songs of '...Opposites'. Also the use of trumpets, saxophones and accordions by the band, on some of the slower songs, gives their music a whole different sound and feel; these songs show a group of musicians who are not afraid to try and do things a little differently.

Try 'Touching The Rain', the beautiful 'Ink', 'The Witness', crushing opener 'Luxury Of A Distraction' (where guitarists Paul Raimondi and Mauro Paganelli riff and spar with each other as their interweaving guitar patters shred the flesh from your very bones) as well as 'The Big Trick' and discover a band who play heavy dark Symphonic Metal with searing guitar solos, clever intricate arrangements and some superb captivating vocals; I'm sure soon you'll become a fan of this act's music.

As much as I like Nightwish and their ilk, there are still plenty of bands out there in Metal-Land who have a sound and style all their own and there is nothing better than getting to discover them and listen to their music. Ravenscry are an act that I will now keep my beady eye on. Good stuff.

Ian Johnson

RED TIDE RISING – 'THE RISING' *(Death Box)* Genre: Hard Rock

'The Rising' is the latest album from Denver-based band Red Tide Rising. The album kicks off with the instrumental 'Rising Tides', a dark and mostly melodic introduction. The first half of the album is generally pretty miserable; the pace rarely elevates, or even changes.

The band has a competent Melodic Metal sound nailed down but they struggle to make each song its own. Guitarist Andrew Whiteman's riffs are very similar across the album, with the vocals taking a generally more back-seat approach and exploring very little range.

It's strange that the album is quite so disappointing because you feel that these guys can actually play. 'Misery' shows off vocalist Matt Whiteman's rougher style and his ability to manipulate his voice. 'This Is War' finally brings in some adrenaline and action; the guitars drive the rhythm but there's still not enough variety. Final and title track 'The Rising' is one of the more stimulating songs but it all becomes rather messy towards the end.

Overall, 'The Rising' is overly repetitive and offers little in way of new and original material.

Sophie Brownlee

SACRED WIND – 'SACRED WIND' *(Independent)* Genre: Heavy Metal

In the grand old British tradition of being very silly whenever possible, Sacred Wind are a bunch of mad Welsh chaps who sing songs about Vikings and farting. Yes, whilst Steel Panther sing about having sex with girls, SW are a band that prefer a good curry, whether it be going in or out of their bodies. Tidy.

Albums that are supposed to be funny are always awkward for me, because it's pretty certain that the joke will wear thin pretty soon. SW kicks off with a rather amusing spoken word intro, which is followed (not at all surprisingly) by a dozen Trad Metal offerings like 'Metal & Curry', 'Fart For Odin' and 'Rock, Rock, Rock, Rock Ragnatok'. The latter is a rather plodding affair livened up by a cracking guitar solo (from lead axe man Grundi The Windy), whilst '…Odin' is pretty catchy and will have you singing along from the off. Lyrically everything is as expected, with the fair maiden "Frigg" being told "Your armpits smell of wine", and we are asked in 'Sacred Wind' "can you see my cheeks tremble as the gases start to rise".

Musically there's no doubt that SW have some quality bursting through the silliness. Grundi is a seriously good guitarist, evidenced throughout the album and on the bonus instrumental track 'The Sheep's Lament'. Olaf The Berserker provides Traditional Metal vocals (a bit like a cut price Bruce Dickinson) with Smid The Merciless and Agnar The Hammered bringing together a pounding bass and drum section. In the end, Sacred Wind have provided us with an album that has good tunes as well as fun lyrics, so if you like a bit of old-school Metal and find the phrase "the power of cheese puts hair on your knees" amusing, this may well be the album for you.

Alan Holloway

SALIVA – 'RISE UP' *(Rum Bum)* Genre: Hard Rock

The new album from Saliva, 'Rise Up', is like opening a fridge full of Pont l'Eveque. Their overstating riffs, heavily groove-laden songs with their pubertal lyrics would give 1980s Hair Metal band Nitro a run for their money.

The title track 'Rise Up' is a hybrid of Linkin Park and Limp Bizkit. It lacks lustre and balls that inspires the listener to keep listening. 'She Can Sure Hide Crazy' shows their Post-Punk Pop roots, with a strong taste of Nickelback in the melody. Saliva have been going since 1996 and they have definitely stuck strong and been loyal to that era but times have moved on, now Saliva need to move on.

The record then turns to the cliché with 'Lost'. The whole composition of the song is generic and the lyrical themes come across as an adolescent trying to find "him or herself"; it has a very amateur feel. '1000 Eyes' starts off promising with a heavier edge, guitar that is down-tuned to a Doom like sound but this disappears and goes back to the basics – it could almost be a track for a budget teenage action-film.

'Redneck Freakshow' refers to their Southern heritages but hasn't got that Southern swagger. Instead it is has all the necessities of a Pop song structure.

Then it just gets "better and better" [I just felt that heavy slab of sarcasm hit the floor outside – Ed] with 'Choke'; it is simply a copy of previous songs and in keeping with the focus on childish themes of rebellion. In the album, dynamics are not played around with to keep you interested; it all comprehends a similar tone, speed and texture.

The record encompasses no hooks, catchy lyrics or striking rhythm sections – leaving no engagement with its listener. The solos are lifeless too. On a more positive note it's only forty two minutes long.

Lara Kisel

SATIN – 'SATIN' *(Verum)* Genre: Melodic Rock

There are times when a cheap looking album cover will put you off checking out the music inside (Tane Cain anyone?). I'll be honest here and say that if I hadn't been specifically asked to review the debut album by singer, writer, producer and multi-instrumentalist Satin, the promo would be un-played and at the bottom of a box in the basement until such a time as I needed a clear plastic slipcase. Whilst I'm not about to claim that the young Norwegian is about to become the next Rick Springfield or Bryan Adams, he has a pleasant Pop Rock voice, an understanding of song-writing and arranging, and obviously knows his way around a studio.

Opener 'Fire The Shot' sets the scene with a good crossover chorus, more Pop than Rock but a good song nonetheless, then because he follows it up with a big, orchestrated ballad you begin to think that maybe it won't Rock enough. However, as polite and clean as Satin's music obviously is, catchy tunes like 'I Want Us', 'I've Been Crazy' and 'Life Will Never Slow Down' up the guitar quotient slightly and add in some quirky keyboard fills and proper guitar solos. The album is at its best in the second half with a trio of Rockers, starting with the album highlight 'Some People Call It Love', on which Satin comes into his own and shows a maturity that will hopefully lead to a bigger record deal.

If he wants to make some serious waves he'd be well advised to drop the cringe-worthy Pop ballads – 'I Don't Need Anybody' and especially the uber-twee 'Friends' make even the wimpiest of REO Speedwagon ballads sound like Lamb Of God – but a decent production, a likeable voice and a handful of classy songs almost make you forget the fuzzy black and white photos on the cover.

Phil Ashcroft

SATURN – 'ASCENDING (LIVE IN SPACE)' *(Rise Above)* Genre: Heavy Metal

"Not all those who wander are lost" – J.R.R. Tolkien; he was obviously never a member of Saturn. This Swedish quintet produce a type of work which is packed full of moments, but never seeming to coalesce to a satisfying whole. They state that Metal "is not rocket science" so why all the blueprints and little diversions?

Certainly the basis is Metal, with a thin "authentic" NWOBHM basis, but there are also Misfits organs, faux Arabian airs, Proggy bits, bass runs, mouth organs, some of them seven or eight minutes long; none of them good enough to demand that time. They need to go somewhere if they are going to take their time about it, not just draw back a curtain, shout "ta-dah" and show us an unconnected selection of items. It needs to have a coherence, a belief, a groove; in some genres this approach would be welcome… Metal is not one of them.

There is a solo here that touches the great Paul Kossoff sound and not many can say that, an occasional reining in to deliver a swaggering call to arms only slightly hampered by an attempt at a Neo-Classical solo and an over reliance on agitation. In Pinter's marvellous play 'The Homecoming', son Teddy, home from the States with a new wife to visit his rapacious, carnivorous family says, as things shift and move around him, that he won't be lost in the world he is in. Peter Brook told us that the woods were lovely, dark and deep; he did not enter... we think. This is the danger of taking that walk, of succumbing to the feeling, of filling yourself up with it all until you are almost bursting and then trying desperately to shape it into something that we can appreciate, enjoy and, well, get. Here what we have are a lot of influences all fighting in a sack to leap into our consciousness; just as we enjoy one sound, hey presto, here comes another one, jumping up and down and shouting.

Saturn's biggest moon, Titan, is often thought to harbour life. That's big news and wonderful to think. This Saturn is teeming with life; but not such a good discovery at all.

Steve Swift

SCREAM MAKER – 'LIVIN' IN THE PAST' *(Perris)* Genre: Heavy Metal

"Metal will never die", Ronnie James Dio sung on what turned out to be one of his last ever recordings – and after having listened to Scream Maker's debut album 'Livin' In The Past', you know one of the Founding Fathers Of Heavy Metal was right. Backed up by Alessandro Del Vecchio's flawless production and guest musicians – legendary Polish guitarist Wojciech Hoffmann (Turbo) and keyboard virtuoso Jordan Rudess (Dream Theater), this young Polish band appear to have it all. But do they...?

Apart from the enthralling, futuristic cover artwork (designed by Roslaw Szaybo, the man behind the Judas Priest's 'British Steel' cover), what 'Livin'...' offers is a journey decades back in time – back to the days when denim-and-leather clad Metalheads were neither a rarity nor dusty museum pieces.

Instead of following the current trends and recording another soulless Gamma Ray and/or Helloween clone, what SM presents is only a little bit of Power Metal gallop so as to spice things up ('Glory For The Fools' or the final anthem 'Metalheads'). The rest – from the single track 'In The Nest Of Serpents' to the Alice Cooper-infused, direful 'Confessions' – is pure Classic Heavy Metal with distinct influences of NWOBHM; the kind of thing every Iron Maiden, Dio or Saxon fan should certainly dig. In mellower tracks – such as 'Livin' In The Past' or 'All My Life' – you'll hear some distinct vibes of 1980s Hard Rock along with bands like Dokken. And of course, there are moments that are slowed down as well – 'Stand Together' and 'Never Say Never' are the sort of tracks that bring to mind a sea of cigarette lighters held aloft by a barely dry-eyed concert audience.

Fronted by Sebastian Stodolak, a charismatic and talented singer whose high pitched voice brings the best vocal traditions back into the world of Metal, and comprised of musicians eager to strike a spark out of their instruments – Scream Maker certainly knows what Heavy Metal is all about. And it's more than possible we'll hear about these self-proclaimed Warsaw-based "Metalheads" in the future, with 'Livin' In The Past' being hopefully just a beginning of a promising career. Highly recommended to every fist-pumping, head-banging Metal fan out there.

Alexandra Mrozowska

SECRET – THE END OF THE ROAD *(MelodicRock)* Genre: Melodic Rock

You know all those ridiculous TV chefs who announce "my take on an old favourite" and then give us a deconstructed apple pie consisting of an apple and a roll of pastry? Well, this Spanish band doesn't confect such errant nonsense, but they do take stuff we know well and shape it to their will.

'Here With Me' is a rousing offering, soaring to the skies but always with one eye on the Classic Rock charts and doing the Bluesy business. 'Since I Fell For You' actually has some Pop sensibility and 'Just To Hear You Say' has all the chiming expected from AOR except that a Country tinged solo crashes the party. 'I Believe In Love' does the same but with more style, 'Peace Of Mind' messes about with some well heard melodies but is saved by that Toto one - note piano purity – and 'Bring You Down' is them finally having a go at an almost full on smoky atmospheric track. And then Christopher Cross Rocks up to sooth us on 'Angeline' but offers nothing but calm imprecations.

This is well done; Jesus Espin takes his tonsils for a stroll very successfully and Ivan Gonzalez takes care to make his solos flow like a rolling river. It is just that we will have heard it before, perhaps not done this way but certainly familiar. They pick and choose stuff to use, stick it together and make a sometimes intoxicating brew.

The other times you can take it or leave it.

Steve Swift

ROBERT REED – 'SANCTUARY' *(Tigermoth)* Genre: Progressive

Some of you, who are of a similar age to myself (close to the half century) will probably remember all the hoo-ha that surrounded the release of Mike Oldfield's 'Tubular Bells' when it came out in 1973. That album, for whatever reason, became one of the soundtracks of the 1970s and showcased an incredibly talented young man who could play every instrument put in front of him, seemingly with ease.

It was also the catalyst and primary influence that made a very young boy (aged seven at that time), one Robert Reed (Magenta, Kompendium), want to learn to play musical instruments and also to become a song-writer. That drive and ambition instilled in Reed by '...Bells' has now, after all the intervening years, culminated in the album 'Sanctuary' on which we find Reed not only writing everything but also playing all twenty-two instruments that can be found on the album (including tubular bells!).

As for the music itself – which is stylistically in the same vein as the aforementioned '...Bells' – 'Sanctuary Parts 1 & 2', are two fully separate musical pieces, split across the CD and each part clocks in at around the twenty minute mark. The two halves of this epic work contain memorable themes that run throughout each of the two distinct sections of music, though they do at points have melodies that interweave during the forty minutes play time. What astonishes you the most however, as you as you listen to the album, is the fact that nobody does this kind of thing these days. A forty minute album with everything composed and played by just one person is unheard of and the fact that Reed has done it and can keep the listener entertained throughout the albums length, speaks volumes for the man and his talent.

As a purely instrumental piece of work it is hard to say to you that you must listen to a certain part at eleven minutes and ten seconds etc, because 'Sanctuary' is the type of musical composition that must be enjoyed in its entirety. You cannot take snippets from here and there and just enjoy a couple of minutes of the music. Instead you must take pleasure in, and marvel at, the whole thing in just one sitting. Only then can the true strength and depth of what Reed has actually accomplished be rightly appreciated.

'Sanctuary' deserves a much bigger audience than I fear it will get but I know that the loyal readers of Fireworks, who all love great music and this is great music, will love what Robert Reed has done on this his masterpiece. So do yourselves a favour and grab a copy of 'Sanctuary' as soon as you can. In summing up, this could have been just a one word review – brilliant.

Ian Johnson

SEETHER – ISOLATE AND MEDICATE *(Spinefarm)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

Follow up to 2011's 'Holding On To Strings Better Left To Fray' sees the band on a new label. A move that initially proved controversial, angering Seether's vocalist Shaun Morgan who said of the sale – "we were just being sold off like some sort of product". It has since been recognized by the band as a good move in terms of artistic integrity.

Wind-Up sold its back catalogue to Bicycle Music as well as its new recordings to offshoot Concord music group, the theory being that the label would then have money available to sign new acts and promote their existing trimmed roster. Spinefarm has taken up the option to release the album in Europe.

'Isolate And Medicate' isn't simply another album and deserves to be labeled more than just the bands sixth; arguably this is Seether's strongest and most commercial album to date and although Brendan O'Brien again produces (as he did on its predecessor), it has a stronger collection of songs. Whereas 'Holding …' felt like it was a slightly experimental proving ground, this latest effort feels like the band knew what would work and what wouldn't.

The Nirvana influences remain present as you would expect, no more so than on opener 'See You At The Bottom' or the heavy showdown of 'My Disaster', but elsewhere there's uplifting forays into Pop territory as on the Weezer-like 'Same Damn Life', the Tears For Fears tinged 'Words As Weapons' or 'Crash' with its Indie Rock vibe. For angry Seether look no further than 'Suffer It All', for Mainstream Rock Seether there's 'Nobody Praying For Me' or 'Keep the Dogs At Bay', and for Pop Punk Seether there's always 'Watch Me Drown'.

Sure, fans of old 'Disclaimer' era Seether may point to the fact that as a whole the album isn't heavy or angry enough, but that album came out over ten years ago. The band – and in particular Morgan – has grown up, they get angry when they need to and the aggression is tempered with a depth and class of song-writing that shows that not only has this band evolved but they have managed to stay relevant in 2014. With 37,000 sales in its first week of release and single 'Words As Weapons' number one at Active Rock Radio in the U.S. it speaks for itself really doesn't it?

Mike Newdeck

SHAMAN'S HARVEST – 'SMOKIN' HEARTS & BROKEN GUNS' *(Mascot)* Genre: Hard Rock

Sometimes bands come along and you think "hey, that's good, why haven't I heard these guys before?" That's exactly what happened to me with Shaman's Harvest, only it turns out I had heard them before.

The band released 'Shine' independently, an album which spawned a hit single in the form of 'Dragonfly', which was a smash hit in the U.S., racking up sales of 150,000 and the video getting a couple of million hits on YouTube. They also contributed theme tunes for WWE stars Drew McIntyre and Wade Barrett, and as a big wrestling fan, that's where I had unwittingly heard them. I've been introduced to a lot of good music from watching WWE, so I was only too happy to check out the band's latest release now they are signed to Mascot.

'Smokin' Hearts & Broken Guns' is a triumph on many levels. The powerhouse opener 'Dangerous' is an immediate attention grabber, Hard and Heavy Rock with great vocals and a big chorus. With Nathan Hunt's versatile and powerful voice over the assault of guitars and the pounding rhythm section, the album spans the aggression of Metal, the droning power of Heavy Rock and the pace of Hard Rock. Alongside that, 'Ten Million Voices' showcases a great take on Modern Rock and 'In Chains' has a Blues tinge to it.

During the recording, vocalist Hunt was diagnosed with throat cancer. Showing an incredible attitude and positive thinking, he literally attended treatment before heading into the studio daily. He threw himself into the recording and delivered some amazing work. 'Blood In The Water', with its an eerie intro, is a song that builds and builds and is the best example of Hunt's superb voice and range, making the song a high point on an already strong record.

There's a terrific cover of Michael Jackson's classic 'Dirty Diana' which works surprisingly well as a Hard Rock song, while you can't help but smile at the energetic, Skynryd-esque 'Country As Fuck'. The band also proves themselves to be adept at ballads with the exquisite 'In The End'. The album rounds off with a brand new take on the song that started it all for them, 'Dragonfly'.

With considerable success in the U.S. already, Shaman's Harvest are looking to break into Europe, and with an album as strong as this, the future for them looks very bright indeed. Excellent.

James Gaden

SOUND OF ETERNITY – 'VISIONS & DREAMS' *(Melodicrock)* Genre: Melodic Rock

Don't you just love bands with a "powerful message"? Well if you do, then Sound Of Eternity are for you because that phrase crops up a lot in their promotional blah. Unfortunately, the "powerful message" is, basically, "God is awesome!" so no points for that. Lucky for them an atheist got the review job, eh?

I suppose it's a testament to the quality of this, the Italian band's debut, that I can categorically say that the fact this is a Christian band should not in any way put you off. For most of the time vocalist Beatriz Aranda could be singing to a really great boyfriend, rather than a potential higher plain being, and unlike Stryper, they really don't ram anything down your throat (metaphorically, that is).

The thing is 'Visions & Dreams' is really rather good. If you added a few violins and the like, it would pass easily for a Symphonic Rock album; such is the naturalistic flow of the songs and the ethereal quality of Aranda's voice. That's not to say this is some dull hippy album… oh no. This is a full on Melodic Rock album that has some really catchy tracks, like opener 'Call To Action' which reminds me of Treat's great track 'Paper Tiger'. The slowest track is 'Eternal Love', which to be honest is a bit of a yawn, but in general the album has plenty of crunchy guitars and good melodies. It sounds clear as a bell, too, no doubt the result of getting future legend Erik Martensson to mix and master it.

What SOE have done is make a debut album with elements that will appeal to all sorts of Rock fans, except maybe the Dark Metal lot. Less preachy than Stryper yet more modern and heavy than Petra, Sound Of Eternity look like they could be the new torch bearers for Christian Rock, praise be to Bod (and Aunt Flo etc).

Alan Holloway

SPACE ELEVATOR – 'SPACE ELEVATOR' *(Nova U.K.)* Genre: Pop Rock

The Space Elevator project was instigated primarily by guitarist David Young, who features as part of the house-band for the 'We Will Rock You' stage show. By enlisting the services of several seasoned musicians, including keyboard player Elliot Ware, drummer Brian Greene, veteran bassist Neil Murray and vocalist The Duchess, Young has managed to create a batch of songs that varying in style and mood and conjure up a host of 1970s and 1980s references.

As you would expect from Young's background, there is strong theatrical element running through the material and a number of the songs would not be out of place in a West End production. 'We Are The Losers' for example, could be an over the top theme song to a Roger Moore fronted Bond movie and The Duchess's voice has a retro edge in that respect. Every song contains an immediate hook, backed up by semi-theatrical arrangements and I can imagine each one being performed on Top Of The Pops back when the charts actually meant something. 'Ordinary Day' is a hit in waiting and The Duchess is superb, whilst 'Little White Lies' is built on a trippy Psychedelic bedrock; the structure reminiscent of David Bowie's output forty years ago.

'Loneliness Of Love' borders on AOR and has a brilliant hook, but there is still enough variation in the musical undercurrent to avoid generic clichés. The riff and stabbing keys, and guitar solo for that matter, could have come from any number of high profile Female-Fronted Melodic Rock acts from three decades ago. 'Oils And Bubbles' could be a quirky Queen leftover and the lyrics, courtesy of The Duchess, are totally bonkers.

Granted, 'Space Elevator' is more Pop than balls to the wall Rock, but when the songs are this good and performed so well musical boundaries become redundant anyway. I'd love to hear The Duchess tackle something in a heavier vein based on her performance here and I'm sure Young will be able to break away from the stage to develop a higher recording profile. With the right exposure, the songs on this album could go down a storm on mainstream radio and though the hardcore Rock crowd may not be as appreciative as those with more varying tastes… I know I love it.

Dave Bott

SPACE RAFT – 'SPACE RAFT' *(Dusty Medical)* Genre: Rock

The retro look of the cover and space references throughout the lyrics tell part of the story of this four-piece from Milwaukee, but it's not the Acid Space Rock you might anticipate. Instead, the band are a mix of David Bowie Glam, Rock guitar and Alt Pop melodies. The closest comparison I can come up with would be to say they sound a bit like Blur if that band had less Art Rock pretension and a more laid back 1970s Rock cool.

The band's lynchpin Jordan Davis sounds like Damon Albarn trying to do an early Bowie impersonation with 'Never Is Enough', the Glam 'Jupiter Calling' and 'Anything Is Possible' all having a bubblegum Pop Rock vibe but its left of centre influences stop the Pop getting too sweet. There are even tiny traces of Tom Petty lurking in some of the grooves.

The "space" that the band sing about is the space that looks like it's fun to be in; you know the one where astronauts have a laugh playing in their spaceship messing around doing kooky stuff with weightlessness rather than the black endless emptiness imagery that many Prog bands mine.

The band all add their vocals on 1970s off kilter harmonies on the choruses, which combined with the low-fi production values to make this an album that record stores (if there are any left in your town) are as likely to file under Alternative as much as they are Rock.

Its quirkiness will resonate with those that get it but 'Space Raft' might leave those looking for a more generic Rock sound nonplussed. Its Pop Rock shimmer makes it a summer record for those with left field tastes with pasty skin who need to avoid the sun's direct rays.

Duncan Jamieson

SPIKE – '100% PURE FRANKIE MILLER' *(Cargo)* Genre: Rock

Having been something of a relatively recent convert to the Quireboys and the lovable rogue that is Spike, as well as being a long time fan of the subject, I was very interested to hear this album – a self proclaimed labour of love to pay tribute to Frankie Miller, the legendary Scottish singer/song-writer who was struck down in 1994 by a brain haemorrhage and who has spent the last twenty years recovering, although he may never be at a level where he can perform again. Miller was apparently a huge influence on Spike, as he has been to many other performers, and this album is a collection of twelve songs by Miller which capture the essence of his style and have been recorded with his blessing.

I really can't imagine anyone other than Spike being able to give these songs the delivery they deserve. I loved 'I'm Losing You' – very reminiscent of the Rolling Stones 'Fool To Cry' or Rod Stewart's 'Ballad of Georgie', while 'Intensive Care' is straight off a Quireboys album. It's so obvious, on this track especially, that Spike owes a hell of a lot to Miller. His duet with Bonnie Tyler on 'Fortune' is just a glorious rendition, harking back to Miller's own performances with her in the past; an emotional rollercoaster for her, I'm sure. 'Cheap Hotel' is one of the few upbeat numbers on the album and is a welcome break from the moody and melancholy, but overall this is a very moving album, none more so than the closing track 'Bottle Of Whisky' – poignant lyrics indeed.

If it weren't for Spike and this group of Miller's friends, these songs may never have seen the light of day. Featuring an awe-inspiring list of performers like Simon Kirke, Ian Hunter, Luke Morley, Andy Fraser, Ronnie Wood and Tyler, Spike has done Frankie Miller and his fans proud.

Sue Ashcroft

STARCHILD – 'STARCHILD' *(Gloria)* Genre: Power Metal

Starchild is the latest project from German all rounder Sandro Giampietro, whose past work includes plenty of stuff with Michael Kiske (who also duets on one track here), Zillion and his own band Sandro. To be honest, Starchild may as well be his own band, as he does all the writing, singing, guitars, piano and probably makes the tea as well. Basically, if this is

SLASH FEAT. MYLES KENNEDY AND THE CONSPIRATORS – 'WORLD ON FIRE' *(Dik Hayd International)* Genre: Hard Rock

Success hasn't exactly been a stranger for Slash since he parted ways with Guns 'N' Roses, yet neither were his previous forays an unmitigated triumph. Slash's Snakepit always felt like a stop-gap and when Velvet Revolver were good, they were great, yet when they weren't... However through the arrival of his 2010 eponymous solo debut things suddenly dropped into place; songs featuring the likes of Ian Astbury (The Cult), Ozzy Osbourne, Chris Cornell (Soundgarden), Myles Kennedy (Alter Bridge) and Fergie Duhamel (The Black Eyed Peas) immediately possessing a previously lost energy and focus in both song-writing and guitar playing. Key to the success of the whole thing though was the tour with Kennedy that followed leading to the pair teaming up as a writing and performing partnership for 2012's even better 'Apocalyptic Love'. Completing the line-up was drummer Brent Fritz (The Union/Alice Cooper), bassist Todd Kerns (Age Of Electric) and rhythm guitarist Frank Sidoris (The Cab).

Proving that Slash is now definitely in a band situation, the same four appear for "solo" album number three, 'World On Fire'. Lead single 'World On Fire' opens the album, an unmistakable Slash riff spiralling straight into a burst of cowbell (I'm sold already!) and the authoritative vocals of Kennedy, which as before do have a wisp of a certain Mr. Rose about them, while still standing tall and proud on their own. It's a bullish beginning, yet across the (rather long at seventeen tracks) album it is a standard easily lived up to. 'Shadow Life' struts in an undeniably G&R kinda fashion, second single 'Bent To Fly' pulls back the pace for a beautiful example of why Kennedy is viewed as one of the best current singers in straight-up Rock, his guitar-mate providing yet another in the collection of sublime solos this album delivers.

Usually I struggle with releases of this length, suggesting that picking the best twelve songs or so would have been a better battle-plan. Here, the only omission I'd have made is possibly the instrumental (Slash's first), 'Safari Inn', with its slow shuffle coming across like a budget Joe Satriani. A nice idea, but… however balanced against the roaring dance of 'Avalon', the brooding stomp of 'Beneath The Savage Sun' and mid-paced 'Iris Of The Storm', then one indulgence can be forgiven.

It's always a joy to hear a genre legend operating at the peak of their powers and while there was a time when it seemed Slash may never quite reach that stage again, three superb albums in a row confirm otherwise. If you were as taken by either 'Slash', or 'Apocalyptic...' as I was, then you'll know exactly how 'World On Fire' sounds and how good it is.

Steven Reid

shit there's only one person to blame. Thankfully, this release is far from shit (although I hear he makes a terrible cup of tea).

The music produced by Starchild is very palatable indeed. Packaged as Power Metal and deservedly so, it comes over like a delicious cross of mid-eighties Helloween and Iron Maiden, helped by the fact that Giampietro himself has a powerful voice that often brings Bruce Dickinson to mind. Add to that some galloping Rock songs that don't stop for breath, yet are filled with catchy melodies to die for, and you have an album that certainly stands out in the crowd.

You can see why Giampietro has been rated so highly by his peers, as his guitar work and vocals shine throughout, allowed to do so because his song-writing is just as impressive. To be honest, it's a bit overlong at nearly an hour, but there are no duff songs on offer and I've listened to it plenty of times without getting at all bored. Basically, if you like old-school Power Metal, this is a slam dunk of a purchase that you certainly won't regret.

Alan Holloway

STEVE HACKETT – 'GENESIS REVISITED: LIVE AT THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL' *(InsideOut)* Genre: Progressive

I've been known to express my opinion on the cynical approach of re-releasing albums with bonus material in an effort to get the fans to buy the same thing twice and I suppose there could be an argument that this package falls into that category given this is the second live release inside eight months. However, for Genesis/Steve Hackett diehards (like me) I believe there's more than sufficient variety on offer to make this a compelling purchase.

Whilst the core of the set is the same as that from the Hammersmith version released in the autumn, six tracks don't reappear having been replaced by five other classics. There are a couple of different guests on show and two returnees singing alternative songs. The band is once again sensational and I'm in awe of Lee Pomeroy's versatility as he moves seamlessly between double neck bass/12 string, guitar and bass pedals.

'Dance on a Volcano' is a great start but it is trumped by a superb rendition of 'Dancing With the Moonlit Knight' where Nad Sylvan carries the vocals every bit as well as Peter Gabriel did back in the day.

Two of the replacement tracks follow and these bring the first guest appearances. To my mind Ray Wilson has made 'Carpet Crawlers' his own and here he doesn't disappoint. The additional backing vocals certainly add something extra to the song, as they do on other tracks. Next up is Roine Stolt (The Flower Kings, Transatlantic…) who trades solos with Hackett on 'The Return of the Giant Hogweed', with Sylvan excelling once more as he does on the equally splendid 'Fountain of Salmacis'.

Wilson puts in another appearance later in proceedings with 'I Know What I Like', sharing lead with Sylvan very effectively before regular cohort, John Wetton, lends his considerable vocal prowess to the wonderful 'Firth of Fifth'. Amanda Lehman joins Hackett for 'Ripples', but for me this doesn't really work with a female vocal.

Despite Hackett being a personal favourite, I recognise that he's not infallible and that he's at his best when his solos, such as that on the iconic 'Firth..', are structured; ad lib is not his forte. Consequently, each of 'In That Quiet Earth', 'I Know…', 'Supper's Ready' and 'Los Endos' have sections that aren't as tuneful as they could be as he goes off piste. That's a minor quibble as overall this is a terrific collection which is filmed and edited in a fitting manner.

By the time you read this review Steve Hackett will be rehearsing the third leg of this jaunt with fresh songs being added to the repertoire. Live CD/DVD #3 anyone?

Gary Marshall

STEVE ROTHERY BAND – 'LIVE IN ROME' *(InsideOut)* Genre: Progressive

As a precursor to 'The Ghosts Of Pripyat', his first ever solo studio release, Marillion guitarist Steve Rothery presents 'Live In Rome', which rather bravely is a document of only the second time he and his solo band ever performed together on stage. Literally an album of two halves (and a DVD!) this two CD collection finds disc one focusing on the '…Pripyat' bound material; instrumental guitar led fare being the order of the day. Unsurprisingly, Rothery doesn't spend his time shredding or riffing manically, however neither does he waste it retreading a Marillion style, with the mood and feel pleasantly removed from the expected. There are even times where it isn't immediately possible to spot it is old Rother's himself that is actually playing.

For the main, the likes of 'Morpheus' or 'The Old Man Of The Sea' are built round atmospheric and dextrous fret-work, the guitarist's band ably matching his busier than usual playing to perfection. 'Yesterday's Hero', which Rothery dedicates to his Step Father (one of the nicest and initially most surprising things about this album is actually hearing this usually microphone-less veteran of the Prog scene speak!) is a wonderful example of the poised and controlled, yet intricate and at times bullish, music we can expect from the soon to be released studio debut; Rothery taking the opportunity to have a stronger say in his song's outcomes than his day job sometimes allows.

Disc two falls back on that main source of work, 'Waiting To Happen', 'Afraid Of Sunlight', 'Easter', 'Sugar Mice' and 'Cinderella Search' aired through the help of guest vocalists. It's strange yet enjoyable to hear these offerings with neither Steve Hogarth nor Fish in sight and with slight Italian accents, or female voices in evidence, yet all the singers provide excellent performances to reasonably true interpretations.

As a hint of what is to come, 'Live In Rome' whets the appetite rather nicely, while also ensuring that fans of either Marillion, or understated instrumental guitar led music, will be more than satisfied with this first helping of solo Steve Rothery.

Steven Reid

STATE OF SALAZAR – 'ALL THE WAY' *(Frontiers)* Genre: AOR

State Of Salazar is the latest Swedish Melodic Rock/AOR outfit staged to deliver their remarkable full-length debut 'All The Way' on Frontiers. A collective of talented musicians who have clearly done their homework, SOS oozes influences with the likes of Toto, Queen, Journey, Boston and just about every other platinum-selling AOR band from the genre's heyday back in the 1970s and 1980s. Although never better realized than on the title track, SOS does not simply re-write the classics in the AOR canon, they create something that is as much distinctive to themselves as it pays tribute to the original trendsetters.

Marcus Nygren's vocals are strong and commanding, comprising elements of Bobby Kimball (Toto), Joseph Williams (Toto) and Dennis DeYoung (Styx). If an AOR band is from Sweden and the song title is a woman's name, it is probably a winner. Much like Work Of Art's 'Maria,' 'Camilia' and 'Emelie,' SOS deliver a pair of tour-de-forces all their own with 'Marie' and 'Adrian'. The somewhat conservative production (soft compression and not bass heavy) further magnifies the band's understanding, detail and mastery of the genre.

Surprisingly not used more often in the lexicon of music reviews, "lush" is the word to precisely describe '…Way.' Its maturity belies the band's tenure and possesses all the pomp and circumstance we have come to expect with modern AOR. '…Way' takes you back, yet never ceases to continue looking forward. To further reinforce that sentiment, this dazzling talent are utilizing (and to great effect) all of the wonderful technological advancements in the studio to afford elegant sonics and world class production.

SOS's full-length debut is one of the finest of the year and will absolutely find its way onto many of the "Best Of" lists for 2014 and they deserve to stand shoulder to shoulder with their Swedish Melodic Rock brethren; Work Of Art, H.e.a.t, Eclipse, Treat, The Theander Expression, The Poodles... the list continues to grow! Without doubt, if originally released back in AOR's glory days, 'All The Way' would break the Billboard charts... yeah, it's that good.

Brent Rusche

STRIKER – 'CITY OF GOLD' *(Napalm)* Genre: Heavy Metal

I first became aware of Canadian head banging merchants Striker last year when I heard one of their songs during a film called (seriously) 'Lloyd The Conqueror'. It was a comedy about people dressing up as elves and all that mucking about (and was quite funny) but the song 'Fight For Your Life' struck a chord with me, as it was loud, proud and cheesy as hell.

Anyway, it was a nice coincidence when our Reviews Ed threw their new album my way, as it's not normally the sort of thing I get sent. Striker are seriously old-school Metal, and if you want a summation you can just mix Iron Maiden, Armored Saint, 'Among The Living' era Anthrax and 'Ride The Lightning' era Metallica. As Canadians they are bound to get mentioned in the same breath as cheesy Metallers Anvil, but Striker are in a totally different league musically, trust me.

Whilst the songs here are of your basic verse, chorus, verse, chorus, solo, chorus variety, this doesn't mean they can't be entertaining. Three albums in and these lads sensibly haven't mucked around with a winning formula. The tracks are all attacking and fluid, featuring what can only be described as killer riffs, backed up by a rhythm section that is akin to having Godzilla stamp on your head. Add to this the clear, soaring Metal vocals of Dan Cleary and you have the perfect retro Metal band for those who miss the late eighties and all the dandruff flinging that came with it.

'City Of Gold' has, incredibly, restored my faith in basic, upbeat and above all fun Heavy Metal. The balance between old-school cheese and genuine musical innovation and talent is straddled perfectly here, and anyone who loves their Metal will find Striker to be a refreshing throwback to the days when men were men, women were chicks and jeans were ripped accidentally.

Alan Holloway

STRYPER – 'LIVE AT THE WHISKEY' *(Frontiers)* Genre: Hard Rock

The prolific releases just keep on coming from the evergreen original line-up of Stryper, this time a live CD and DVD from the tour in support of the well received 2013 'No More Hell To Pay' album. Recorded in their home city of Los Angeles at the world famous Whiskey A Go-Go – one of the clubs on the Sunset Strip where they first started playing over thirty years ago – the band proving that they're one of the few from that era who haven't deteriorated with time.

The new album has freshened up the set-list no end, the yellow and black attack eschewing recent opener 'Sing-Along Song' in favour of 'Legacy' and 'Marching Into Battle', two of the heavier songs from the latest record. In terms of musicianship the band are faultless, both Oz Fox and singer Michael Sweet are exceptional guitar players and singers, with Sweet's ability as a greatly underrated guitarist matched only by Fox's similarly unlauded singing voice. Robert Sweet's drum sound is a little flat on this recording, made worse by the quietness of Tim Gaines' bass in the mix, but that's the only problem as they rip through a set that includes more new songs in the title track and the storming cover of 'Jesus Is Just Alright', along with the welcome return of the debut EP's 'You Know What To Do' with those amazing three part harmonies. Other highlights include the wonderful guitar parts in 'All For One' from the controversial 'Against The Law' and an encore of 'To Hell With The Devil' and 'Soldiers Under Command'.

I think it's fair to say that the accompanying DVD of the same show certainly lacks a bit of atmosphere, the small venue being inadequate to house the band's usual array of equipment, although it's interesting to see Robert Sweet playing in a more conventional position than his side-on, visual timekeeper tradition, even if you can't see him that well because Michael Sweet's amps go across the front of the drums. There's been a bit of post-production work going on too, with rhythm guitar added when Michael Sweet clearly isn't playing, a few vocals seem to have been fixed and the small crowd is all but completely absent during the usual participation spots. Other than those the only other difference is that some of the song introductions have been shortened or left out on the CD, as is the prayer and the throwing out of bibles. The Whiskey isn't an ideal place for them to play these days but they're still a classy live act and far more Metallic than they've ever been given credit for.

Phil Ashcroft

SUBURBAN MYTH – 'WELCOME (IF ONLY)' *(Independent)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

It's not unusual for members of bands to live on different continents these days, and Suburban Myth is another example with it being a collaboration between three guys from South Carolina and one from Nottingham, England. There's not a lot of info about them really, even in their official biography, except for the fact their previous release, a six track EP, was very well received, but then they all say that, don't they?

When reality comes crashing down, SM are an Indie band with a few Pop Rock pretensions, sort of like The Goo Goo Dolls crossed with the Kaiser Chiefs or something like

THE SCINTILLA PROJECT– 'THE HYBRID' *(UDR)* Genre: Hard Rock

Remember Balance of Power? I do, with great affection. The Melodic Metal outfit produced four terrific albums in that genre between 1998 and 2003 before simply and disappointingly fading from the scene.

Great news, the core of TSP comprises of former BOP members Lionel Hicks and Tony Ritchie with the one and only Biff Byford (Saxon) providing the vocals; and what they've produced is utterly splendid.

Imagine BOP songs, albeit with a contemporary and tad heavier guitar sound, with Byford on vocals and that's precisely what you've got here. In the process they've managed to unveil a more versatile and varied side of Byford who's never sounded so good; the songs fit him perfectly and have stretched him magnificently. I'd never have expected to use the word subtle but on this album he shows a full range of delivery, styles and great emotion; his brilliant diction also means you can hear every word and nuance.

Ritchie's songs (writing all but two of those on offer, one of those being a co-write) are pivotal and lyrically he's as acute and incisive as ever ("Seems like you fell from grace. I've seen your face, but I never know which one to talk to"). His backing vocals add significantly to the overall feel of some tracks. Every single song has a riff and refrains to die for, hooks big enough to snare sharks, tons of melody and a chorus that sinks into the subconscious and imbeds itself there.

The guitar work sounds like BOPs Pete Southern so I was surprised when it turned out to be a variety of guys including Andy Sneap (ex-Sabbat, Hell); whoever is responsible the guitars are splendid throughout, as are Hicks' drums which are positively Portnoy-esque at times.

Highlights? Frankly it's every track... there's not a filler in sight. From the notes I've made I could spend pages dissecting each one and picking out all the bits that made me purr with pleasure; but there are so many. Opener, 'Scintilla (One Black Heart)' will have you hooked and the quality never diminishes. 'Some Nightmare' starts quietly with delightful piano and develops into an exceptional power ballad; Byford's singing is superb and the vocal arrangement is a delight. 'Pariah' lulls you in then hits you between the eyes while the wonderful 'Life In Vain' mixes the heavy and the restrained so well.

See the interview elsewhere in this issue for details on how this album was born, what's behind it and why it closes with a new version of Saxon's 'No Rest for the Wicked'. I just hope this is the start of something rather special and not a one-off. An absolute cracker.

Gary Marshall

that. They certainly make some catchy guitar based music, particularly the title track, which is also the lead single. Aside from this track there's fourteen others, which is way too many for one album and means that, as is often the case, it starts off as a joy to listen to and ends up as a bit of a chore. Although the songs are fine by themselves they tend to bleed into one big wobbly mess in one sitting, although the saving grace is that they are all pretty short and so none outstay their welcome. It's a bit of a shame that I can't really get into it, as the promise held within is almost tangible.

Suburban Myth obviously have some talent, but 'Welcome (If Only)' just doesn't have enough songs that stand out above the rest. I have a feeling that if it had been brutally culled down to nine or ten songs this would be a better, sharper album, but as it is it just doesn't hit as hard as it could.

Alan Holloway

TARJA – 'LEFT IN THE DARK' *(earMUSIC)* Genre: Symphonic Metal

Any new Tarja release is greeted with a huge fanfare in these parts as the Queen Of Symphonic Metal is treated like a deity and deservedly so. Tarja's music touches an enormous number of people in a way that those who dislike her style of music will never understand, so it's fair to say I will be preaching to the converted.

This release features alternative versions of every song on her album 'Colours In The Dark' (reviewed by me in issue #59) except for one – her cover version of Peter Gabriel's 'Darkness', which is replaced by 'Into The Sun' which was first featured on her live album/DVD release 'Act 1' and also released as a digital-only single.

Chronologically, first song 'Victim Of Ritual' is the first demo recorded straight after the writing process in Stockholm and is bass and guitar heavy sans orchestral embellishment. Next up '500 Letters' is an acoustic version that Tarja played live at Vorterix Radio in Buenos Aires with Julian and Peter Barrett from her band on guitar. Tarja is also a dab hand on piano and combined with her clear vocal, it's an intriguing version of a wonderful soaring melodic song.

'Lucid Dreamer' is an unreleased demo, slightly slower than the finished version with strings and without the 'dream sequence' that was added on 'Colours…'. Then you have an unreleased demo of 'Never Enough' which has a lovely lilting mid-section. Shorn of all the bombast and heavy instrumentation, I actually prefer this version to what it became. Another unreleased demo of 'Mystique Voyage' shows how Tarja hummed the vocal guide line to the song that eventually ended up with a combination of English and Spanish lyrics.

'Into The Sun' replaces 'Darkness' in the running order and although a download code was available for the studio version of the song on the special edition of the album, it was never officially released on CD until now. It's a stunningly gorgeous ballad that should have been on all CD versions of 'Colours…' in my opinion.

'Deliverance' is the entire score without vocals as Tarja wanted people to hear James Dooley's orchestral arrangements, followed by the full orchestral version of 'Neverlight' (bonus track on iTunes version of 'Colours…') that makes it sound heavier and has an added guitar solo from Julian Barrett.

The beautiful ballad 'Until Silence' is a measured acoustic version also from the Vorterix Radio sessions and 'Medusa' finishes the album with Blue October's Justin Furstenfeld's vocals on the original replaced by Tarja herself.

All in all it's probably one for collectors but is certainly capable of standing on its own merits, especially with the sumptuous 'Into The Sun' on this release.

Carl Buxton

THE BABYS – 'I'LL HAVE SOME OF THAT' *(All In Time)* Genre: Hard Rock

There have been some strange reunions in recent years, and on paper this new album from ex-pat Brits The Babys seems to be one of the most surprising ones. Okay, so guitarist Wally Stocker and drummer Tony Brock were half of the original line-up and went on to have successful careers playing with Rod Stewart, amongst others, but in terms of well-known names from the band's history, they lag well behind Journey's Jonathan Cain, Styx bassist Ricky Phillips, and vocalist John Waite, who of course were also three fifths of Bad English.

After some of the early reports I wasn't really looking forward to hearing this album, but after a few listens I can only assume that some were expecting a return to the pure AOR of 'Union Jacks' and 'On The Edge' when the band are obviously aiming at the Bluesy Hard Rock of the debut, 'Broken Heart', and to a lesser extent, 'Head First'.

'I'll Have Some Of That' sees the band being true to their roots, with some cool grooves, good songs and performances, and a sound that any fans of 1970s Rock should enjoy. Stocker and Brock are both top-notch players and they've found the perfect partners in guitarist Joey Sykes and singing bassist John Bisaha, and it's the latter that makes it work.

Bisaha has the charisma and delivery of Waite but also a slightly higher tenor voice that brings an infectious quality to everything he sings, the 'Head First' like opener 'Every Side Of You' and R&B influenced 'All I Wanna Do' immediately setting out the stall with Honky-Tonk piano, organ and female backing vocals. Elsewhere 'It's A Gas' has a great vibe, 'I See You There' is a superb Pop Rock outing and 'Sunrise And Goodbyes' is a classic Funky Rocker with a riff that evokes Led Zeppelin's 'Custard Pie'. There are no real clunkers here and every song has something to recommend it, and whilst it isn't as upbeat or stellar sounding as I'd hoped, it has the feel of a talented band doing exactly what they feel comfortable doing. There's definitely a fan base out there for this, just not the ones who were most curious to hear it.

Phil Ashcroft

THE BLACK RAIN – 'WATER SHAPE' *(Atomic Stuff)* Genre: Hard Rock

I reviewed The Black Rain's debut album 'Night Tales' back in March last year and remarked at what a very good band these young Italians were, showing a lot of promise from a country without a bona-fide Rock 'n' Roll history.

Fast forward a year and they've changed record labels from 'Street Symphonies' to 'Atomic Stuff' and knocked out the "difficult" second album. Having given it a good, solid listen, it's fair to say it's more of a consolidating album than breaking down new barriers. There's at least four good songs contained on this release and they've upped the stakes with thought-provoking lyrics on many other songs.

It's good to see that musical differences haven't caused a musician merry-go-round as so often happens with new emerging bands, so the four guys that recorded '...Tales' are still present and correct – vocalist and ladies' man Mirko Greco, guitarist Eugenio Bonifazi, bassist Marco Molteni and Raffaele Marchesini still occupying the drum stool.

The melodic groover 'Shadows' opens proceedings – a tale of all-consuming near obsessive love followed by the repetitive riff of 'Mesmerize' with its anti-government, anti-war message contained within. There are a number of standard Rockers with a Blues under-current littered throughout the album – '(S)he's So Amazing' (featuring ex-Rain singer Francesco Grandi dueting with Greco) that has a delicious twist at the end ("Standing up she said "The toilet, five minutes, then join me"…then I moved to the place, man, you have to trust me, when she let her dress drop, WHAT THE HELL DID I SEE!?"), 'Brand New Shoes' (Bluesman trying to make it in San Francisco) and 'Flamenco Dancer' (Flamenco guitar intro with hand claps mid-section).

'Robert Johnson' is interesting in that it's an ode to the tragic 1930's Black American Blues singer and musician ("The 27 club is open for him, maybe where he belongs, we'll see Mississippi is burning, don't you know it, don't you know it?") and perhaps gives an inkling to one of their influences if only subtly.

The four songs where The Black Rain really get their "groove on" are 'Rock 'N' Roll Guy' (with accompanying video) a mellow, acoustic-led mature sounding song, the driving Daughtry-esque forceful Rock of 'Times Of Trouble' with its nice use of acoustic melodies, the strong ballad 'Without Love' with keys and string programs by Rain's Antonio Olivo and the final number 'King Of Stones' – a slow burner that builds to a crescendo that not only features drums by Rain's Giacomo Calabria but has a decent bonus "hidden" instrumental that follows on a minute later.

If you liked the debut from these guys then this is a good album to sit alongside it.

Carl Buxton

THE DOWLING POOLE – 'BLEAK STRATEGIES' *(369)* Genre: Rock

In the wake of Ginger Wildheart's record breaking Pledge campaigns, contributors to his projects have released a whole host of excellent albums through the funding platform. Eureka Machines, The God Damn Whores, Jackdaw4, CJ Wildheart, and a solo effort from "Random" Jon Poole all utilising the system. And the family continues to grow, with Jackdaw4 leader Willie Dowling and GDW's main man Poole teaming up for The Dowling Poole, their 'Bleak Strategies' finding a marriage made in heaven.

Opener 'The Sun Is Mine' is a bright mix of keys, guitars and vocals combining in an explosion of Jackdaw4 breaching their restraining order and harassing The Beach Boys into giving up all their best "pap-pap-paaaaaaaah's". It's beyond cheerful, yet there's a niggling snarl biting at your trouser leg and shredding your plimsolls. Cleverly each dash of glorious melody is tempered with an intense need to offer the unexpected, whether that be through wandering brass, the "clung" of harpsichord, or madcap rhythms. First impressions reveal an almost frivolous bent; 'Saving It All For A Saturday' a strange knees up sing-along on LSD and 'Empires, Buildings And Acquisitions' is what 'The White Album' Beatles may have sounded like if they'd spent a lot of their time writing the most memorable TV themes and jingles. Add the grinning madness of the shimmering 'Where The Memories Fester', the floating float of floatiness that becomes 'Twilight Subplot' or the cheek reddening slap of Beatlesy Pop that is 'Getting A Licence' and really it's hard not to be completely sold on the best melodies 2014 has been lucky enough to hear.

It's a real shame that we live in an age where to be considered quirky enough to attain chart success in a world of bland, you have to wear dresses made of cow farts, sing of girls kissing girls as they kiss cream shooting boobed girls, or speak in threatening tones and Tourette's your fothermucking way through a song; for The Dowling Poole should be huge, whether that be through the memorable hook laden nature of their songs, or their razor sharp lyrical content. If you're looking for some of the best Pop, Rock and gently Progressive

shimmers of melody strewn lovely lewdness, 'Bleak Strategies' is all of them rolled into some of the best song-writing you could hope for. Go get it... now.

Steven Reid

THE LAST VEGAS – 'SWEET SALVATION' *(Caroline Intl P&D)* Genre: Hard Rock

You have to admire The Last Vegas. This is their sixth album in a decade, and for most part, they are a name unfamiliar to the average Rock fan.

A classic case of a band out of place and time, had they been around in 1986 we would probably be reminiscing of their influence they had on the scene, but on this release they have stuck to a consistent brand of Rock 'n' Roll set in stone by the likes of Aerosmith and The New York Dolls.

'Touch The Sky' is the kind of song Aerosmith used to write before they hooked up with Diane Warren and became MTV favourites. The song reeks of attitude and the groove never tries to bury the song. Singer Chad Cherry has enough whiney tone and gruff delivery to be labelled a "classic vocalist".

'Come With Me' could be early Faster Pussycat or maybe Buckcherry, but by now you probably get the picture - if Sleaze Rock is your thing then you may want to take a chance on these guys, while long term fans will be getting more of the same.

Punk vibes and snorting vocals has 'Infinite Summer' bouncing all over the place - surely this song deserves a place in a trashy horror flick? A grungy story of lust is the name of the game in 'Lucky Tonight', while the one-two punch of 'Face In The Crowd' will leave you feeling bruised and grimy. 'Miss You' offers a stripped down moment of musical simplicity that lets the chorus blast to the surface, not unlike a long-lost Faces B-side.

The Last Vegas capture an authentic live sound with a good healthy dose of swagger and charm.

Ray Paul

THE MICRONITE FILTERS – 'CHASING GHOSTS' *(Get Bent)* Genre: Country/Southern/Folk

I remember the time; 1977, the Queen's Jubilee, we had a street party and all parents were asked to make their kids a hat for a competition. My mum must have misheard. The day before the party, I was given the information that it was to be a crown; my mum had slaved over a hat with a peak. I was only a kid. I was mortified. My mum's face fell. And at that moment I decided that the hat, a cardboard and felt construction, was fantastic and it just didn't matter. I left the house the following day with the shout 'mine's not a crown, but it's really good!' It was the best there, as well; my mother is a bit special.

And that may be where I get my love and admiration of people who do things a bit differently. My favourite Queen album? 'Hot Space'. My favourite Bowie album? 'Never Let Me Down' is up there. And that's perhaps also why I deride albums like this so much.

The Micronite Filters have beards and hats. They have that gritty Folk feel that hundreds of scenesters are loving so much. They ape Mumford and Sons... oh, and Bellowhead. It might sound refreshing at the beginning as is 'The Ballad Of The Banker's Son'; its Folky, it's Jazzy and it walks in a circle. And follower 'Chasing Ghosts' even adds muted horns to make us think they're trying hard.

But by the time an "authentic" gob iron and stamped foot confection arrives (this will be 'Ladies Man Blues'), it will be such a bore. Closer 'When The Lonesome Whistle Blows' even has the temerity to irk us slowly and even when there's some potential, as in 'The Exile & The Canary', which rolls in an electric piano to cheer us but also unpacks a wholly expected Country solo, the noir nature of the verses and the slow conformity just saps the strength.

The listing is split into two sides to ramp up the legitimacy and the packaging keeps a sense of mystery, the logos are good, the photos are grainy. They do seem to have an assurance in their sound, sometimes sounding like the wonderful Deadbeats who never really made it (remember them, anyone?) but this is scant enjoyment. Blues and Country? My, what a new idea? Do tell me more! And while you're at it, enlighten me about this new magical box that makes things cold... a refrigerator do you call it?

They may become something really special, there may be a strangeness inside them, but right now they sound like they've looked at Classic Rock magazines, thought 'I'll have some of that!' and set about lowering our expectations.

Steve Swift

THE MIGHTY SWINE – 'LAST MAN STANDING' *(Broad Horizon)* Genre: Heavy Metal

After a brief hiatus, bassist and singer Mike Skimmerhorn revives The Mighty Swine with a new album entitled 'Last Man Standing.' Although a noble effort, this album needs refining and does not engender repeated plays. The immediate difficulty is the compromised production; the sonics are just as unrefined as a demo track ('Pool Of Emptiness') that is included as the album's final track.

Behind the lacklustre production however, '…Standing' features some memorable selections including the title track, 'Dead Man's Stare' and 'Thick As Thieves'. Skimmerhorn's voice is quite unique, possessing characteristics from a plethora of notable front-men including (but not limited to) James Hetfield, (Cowboys From Hell-era) Phil Anselmo, Pete Steele and Layne Stayley. His low-tenor range is commanding, gritty and contains a subdued melodicism that makes for a complete listen.

What's more, the accomplished musicianship of its members proves there is no question as to the talent each of these individuals possesses. Songs like 'Two Graves' and 'Rite Of Passage' showcase their deep respect for Black Sabbath and do well constructing variations on the themes set in motion by the classic tracks 'Black Sabbath' and 'War Pigs' respectively.

Doing justice to any legendary Heavy Metal band, especially Judas Priest, is a lofty proposition and takes exquisite attention to detail. However, The Mighty Swine's cover of the Priest's 'Hell Bent For Leather' falls short of improving upon that solidified classic.

'Last Man Standing' has potential but ultimately fails to deliver. In order to turn the heads of those interested in this music and inspire them to return in the form of repeated listens and/or concert attendance, it is paramount to do everything possible to release a product that is musically and sonically complete. Unfortunately, the immense hurdle generated by the comprised production makes any interest in this album largely forgettable.

Brent Rusche

THE NORTH – 'ILLUSIONS' *(Target)* Genre: Progressive

The North are a Danish band consisting of seasoned campaigners Peter Brander and Kim Skovbye and they play "Symphonic Rock with a Celtic touch" (and a harp). Their eponymous debut album, released way back in 1999, sold 20,000 copies. They have also been described as "Denmark's Pink Floyd" but despite the promising start, it's clearly not been plain sailing. Brander and Skovbye have soldiered on, overcoming the loss of their recording contract and the loss of original member Klaus Schønning en route to the writing, recording and release of the new album 'Illusions'. They have also developed impressive solo careers, with Brander recording more than a thousand albums in his Music Sound Studio for the likes of Walter Trout, John Mayall, Mike Tramp and White Lion, and Skovbye releasing three Tolkien-related albums that have been "officially approved by the Tolkien family".

You have to admire Brander and Skovbye's tenacity and commitment to the cause. The question is whether this is matched by the results? Well, what can I tell you? 'Oceans', is a cool and atmospheric opener, it's an instrumental that is initially very laid back with pleasant sprinkles of harp; then at 6:40 the whole thing erupts via a Gilmour-esque solo that takes the roof off. 'You' is less impressive, a bit Beatles-like vocally but still with Floydian overtones, 'Carry Me' opens with some nice harp and blends male and female vocals and the title track is a weightier affair and another atmospheric instrumental. 'The Circle Part 2' is an uplifting instrumental that features bagpipes.

But before you've reached the end of the first play, you already feel like you've got the measure of this album. 'Illusions' is not bad by any stretch but, bagpipes and harp aside, the best bits tend to sound like Pink Floyd and the bits that don't are relatively bland. Gentle and Folky album closer 'Listen' is a possible exception, and at least ensures that you come away smiling.

Michael Anthony

THE RADIO SUN – 'WRONG THINGS RIGHT' *(MelodicRock)* Genre: Melodic Rock

The Radio Sun is the latest band out of Andrew McNeice's Melodic Rock Records stable, and I've a strong feeling, if the going remains good to firm, and they overcome the obligatory hurdles, then this Australian outfit could be riding a winner. Evolving from the glowing embers of Power Pop's Square One, the band consists of Jason Old (lead vocals), Steve Janevski (guitars), Ben Wignall (drums) and new recruit Robbie Erdmanis (bass). They have produced a solid debut here (there are personal gripes, but more of those later) and, as their name intimates, 'Wrong Things Right' is undeniably a radio friendly, summer-sounding Melodic Rock album from start to finish. With Paul Laine on mixing duty you might well immediately think of Danger Danger, and you wouldn't be a million miles away.

I'm not quite sure about the title track opening the album; it's not that it's a bad song, not at all, it actually sums up the band's sound and direction rather well, but it does lack a certain oomph. That is soon rectified with 'Don't Judge A Book By Its Cover' and 'World's Crazy Now'; both are great examples of uplifting, driving Melodic Rock with simple riffing, great choruses and lavish backing vocals – these vocals are a constant throughout the album and a definite highlight. Old's vocals deliver the songs in distinctive fashion, and they immediately reminded me of Matt Mitchell's (Pride) vocal style; however, to these ears Old sounds far better suited to the more upbeat songs as opposed to the measured ones. By the way, there are no ballads on 'Wrong...'! For me though, the star of the album is Janevski; he repeatedly delivers short, spasmodic injections of impressive guitar solos which clearly bear the stamp of his previous Power Pop affiliations and invoke fond memories of the Marvellous 3, Waltham et al. The commercial 'Julie', the edgy 'Do It Again' and the anthemic 'Take A Look Around' all allow Janevski to shine, whilst the rhythm section dutifully and competently carries the songs forward. There aren't any fillers on 'Wrong...', so the home straight maintains the uplifting pace, with 'Summer Girl' and the final track 'Beginning Or

THEORY OF A DEADMAN – 'SAVAGES' *(Roadrunner)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

You've got to love Tyler Connolly and his band; they just keep on doing what they do despite the criticism that they're nothing more than a misogynistic scaled down Nickelback. In this context, Nickelback seem to be held up as some kind of moral innocent in the evolution of crass sexist lyrics. Connolly does indeed sound like Chad Kroeger and yet TOAD remain a different beast entirely. 2011's 'The Truth Is' was a bouncy, tongue in cheek album with elements of Rockabilly and accessible Hard Rock. It is perhaps Connolly's famed humour that critics neither understand, nor particularly like, that sees the misogyny moniker applied to the band as well as the fierce criticism. Q Magazine, that bastion of mainstream American Rock, said of the album – "There are no highlights. Appalling." Yet to anyone who "gets" TOAD, its all part of the fun, the attraction and the charm. 'Lowlife' was a big Rock hit in the States and their star is on the rise in the U.K. and Europe right now, so they're obviously doing something right. Where they win hands down is that in Connolly they have a front-man with undoubted star quality and enough charisma to sink a battleship.

'Savages' steps away somewhat from the sound of the last album, save for 'Blow' (a humorous ode to the insanity of life in 2014), and instead delves into the past with an eclectic sound that manages to combine 'Scars And Souvenirs' era TOAD with the heavy element of their early work. 'Drown' and 'The Sun Has Set On Me' are two of the Grungiest songs that TOAD has ever written; both exhibiting huge Alice In Chains influences. Mid-paced mayhem comes in the form of the title track, featuring a Vincent Price style performance from Alice Cooper, the Skillet-like 'Salt In The Wound' or the angst ridden 'World War Me'. The pacey 'Panic Room' and 'Heavy', a song exposing behavior of people when they listen to Heavy Rock, seem comfortable alongside the sharply written Pop of 'Angel' and 'In Ruins'. Only TOAD would get away with including the country music song 'Living My Life Like A Country Song' featuring Joe Don Rooney (Rascal Flatts) without breaking sweat.

'Savages' manages to combine all the previous elements of the band's sound and whilst it remains refreshingly eclectic, it still manages to sound like the band that fans have come to know and love. With Connolly as the face of the band and with songs readymade for Active Rock and mainstream formats, Theory Of A Deadman have found a formula that works and they're not about to change it, even if Q magazine don't like them. That's the "Theory" anyway.

Mike Newdeck

The End' confirming just what a solid and enjoyable album this is.

So, a great start for The Radio Sun, who undoubtedly have the experience, talent and certainly the potential to stay the course. But personally (and hearing how proficient other band members are in the vocal department) I'd like to maybe see the lead vocal duties shared on the all-important sophomore album, thus giving the band something a little different from their contemporaries. Oh and please guys ... ease off on the clichés!

Dave Crompton

THE SENTON BOMBS – 'CHAPTER ZERO' *(STP)* Genre: Hard Rock

I remember when Punk Rock was just a bunch of herberts with three chords and an attitude… when spitting on the crowd was an art and Sid Vicious was considered a musician. These days, when a band describes themselves as Punk you never know what you're going to get, but it's odds on that it's not gonna be a nostalgic journey back to 1977.

The Senton Bombs certainly fall into that bracket, delivering an album described in the blah as "Punk Rock & Roll" but in reality it's a quality slice of Hard Rock that is gritty yet melodic. 'Chapter Zero' is their third album and upon listening you certainly wouldn't think they were from Blackpool. This is solid, punchy Rock which comes across as a mix of The Ramones and The Almighty with a fair dash of Guns N' Roses (when they were good) and plenty of Glam Rock vibes. Seriously, if 'Heading For The Guillotine' had appeared on 'Appetite For Destruction' it would have been hailed as genius. Joey Class has the perfect voice for the kind of music on show, very sleazy but also tuneful and not a million miles away from Michael Monroe.

As you may have gathered, I like this. There's so many little influences wangled in together, so many nuances in what are initially simple Rock songs, and so much enjoyment to be had from songs like 'No Rest For The Rockin" or 'Acid & Alkaline'; no frills on the surface with plenty of frills underneath, The Senton Bombs don't deserve to be stuffed into the Punk pigeonhole – they need to spread their wings and let the general Rock population discover what they've been missing. Failing that, they could just start spitting on people I suppose.

Alan Holloway

THE WINERY DOGS – 'UNLEASHED IN JAPAN' *(earMUSIC)* Genre: Rock

I was a little surprised to see, with only one album to their name, that The Winery Dogs already have a live album out. I tend to avoid live releases as I find them extremely patchy quality wise; sometimes they have been overly worked on in post production so losing that "live" edge making the album a little pointless. Others aren't worked on enough and come across really badly as its sound capture is too raw or badly mixed. My main problem with live albums though, is it's very rare the atmosphere and magic of actually being there translates across on the live recordings and therefore makes you wonder why you don't just listen to the original studio version. There are a few exceptions and of course the stronger a fan of a band the more impact a live album will have on you.

I don't think there is anything special about this album and at ten tracks it does seem oddly abrupt, but there is no knocking the strong and virtually flawless performances made by all three members which elevate its impact. I do think it's one for completists only, but this live album does come with the debut studio album as a bonus disc so it does make it a value for money release. TWD debut is all kinds of awesome so if you don't already own it this could be a good package to pick up as you'll have the live disc as a bonus.

The energy of their music does shine through and it showcases what an able live unit they can be. It also highlights how they heavily improvise and solo during songs when performing. It doesn't have that "live" magic though to make it an "essential live album"; there is no crowd noise or interaction during the songs which on one hand is good but on the other feels a little too sanitised. My biggest gripe though has to be how the album is edited together. There has been a lot of editing and songs feel clipped rather than blending together, affecting the flow of the music and disrupting your feeling of listening to a live show. The best live albums are put together with a feeling of you are listening to a live show in its entirety with no interruptions and cutting off, so 'Unleashed In Japan' really suffers with that lack of flow and live show impact.

Richie Kotzen's vocals come across really well with some performances making me consider them better than on the studio album, but regardless of the high quality of the musicianship shown, I find very little to recommend this album to people in general.

Paul Woodward

THESE RAVEN SKIES – 'THESE RAVEN SKIES' *(Blackstream Records)* Genre: Hard Rock

Upon listening to this self-titled debut, an old codger like me can sit back and relax knowing that Rock is not dead but in the capable hands of a new generation of musicians! From the opening track 'Magick Waters', these lads prove that they can play. A four-piece hailing from Canada, These Raven Skies can easily Rock your butt off and then turn the whole thing around and give you authentic Folksy-Blues styled meanderings that touch upon more tender emotions!

Chris Perkins on vocals, along with Alex Whitcome on guitar, drummer Shand Munro and bassist Trevor Landmark, create a swirl of varied Rock styling's that will sit in your memory for a long time. This group of four have also caught the eye and ear of The Tea Party's vocalist Jeff Martin who is featured on three songs including 'The Garden'. Martin's influence on the band is notable, but does not take away from their own creative prowess.

TRS have been signed by Blackstream Records and they should be commended for allowing this Canadian assemblage to create a set of songs that flows beyond the borders. This is a band of very serious musicians who wear their collective influences proud. The group are driven by a varied collection of great artists that reach right back to the 1960s. This is most likely the reason that this debut doesn't sound like one at all – more like their third or fourth record!

This self-titled release is made up of nine wide-ranging musical expressions that weave a rich tapestry of Rock-Blues and Electric Folk that at times even touches on the strings of Progressive Rock. These Raven Skies are more than a noteworthy band – in time, they will be a global influence... mark my words!

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

THOMAS ZWIJSEN – 'NYLONIZED' *(Independent)* Genre: Rock

Thomas Zwijsen is a Dutch classical guitarist who gained attention in 2013 with 'Nylon Maiden' which involved solo classical guitar versions of famous Iron Maiden songs. He is now back with 'Nylonized' which covers two themes - a continuation of creating classical guitar instrumental versions of well known songs and his own original material.

The classical re-interpretations generally work. Some lend themselves well, such as Rainbow's 'Black Masquerade' and The Who's 'Behind Blue Eyes', whereas others such as Deep Purple's 'Highway Star' needed more invention. Musically, the most successful is Alice Cooper's 'Poison' with its distinctive chord changes and plaintive vocal melody which is played in a simplistic single note guitar line.

The original material is also non-standard and of most note is 'Perfect Storm' which is a Rock Operetta with three vocalists including Blaze Bayley (ex-Iron Maiden). Dream Theater's Derek Sherinan makes an appearance on three songs and makes his mark whereas the big electric guitar solos are performed by Europe's Kee Marcello

The musicianship is unquestionably of the highest order and it is interesting to hear these interpretations of classic songs played on a classic guitar with nylon strings and no amps (hence the title 'Nylonized'). Worth a listen if you are curious.

Rob McKenzie

UNISONIC – 'LIGHT OF DAWN' *(earMusic)* Genre: Heavy Metal

With last month's teaser EP 'For The Kingdom' (a tasty hors d'oeuvre if ever there was one) suitably whetting the ol' appetite for something a little more substantial, Unisonic now serve up the main event with sophomore album 'Light Of Dawn'.

When Unisonic first appeared on collective radar screens a couple of years ago, much was made of the fact that erstwhile Helloween men Michael Kiske and Kai Hansen were working together in the same band again... indeed, you got the impression that a return to that classic 'Keeper Of The Seven Keys' sound was very much on the cards. The truth however turned out to be rather different, and whilst the odd kerosene fuelled Helloween motif did make an appearance here and there, for the most part the 'Unisonic' album was a much more traditional sounding Melodic Hard Rock album pitched somewhere between Pink Cream 69 and a heavier Place Vendome (not surprising really given the involvement of movers and shakers like Dennis Ward).

For album number two the band – which is rounded out by guitarist Mandy Meyer (Krokus, etc.) and Kosta Zafiriou (PC69) – haven't strayed too far from the same persuasive formula, only this time around everything seems that much bigger. The songs are bigger, the hooks are bigger, the riffs are bigger, the sound (if at all possible) too is bigger… and the range of influences and sounds incorporated also seems to have expanded. Compare and contrast the likes of 'Not Gonna Take Anymore' and 'Your Time Has Come'; the former a swaggering mid-tempo Hard Rocker with a genuine 1980s vibe, the latter a frenzied Speed Metal number pitched somewhere twixt Helloween and Sonata Arctica.

Light and shade has always been a great way of keeping prospective listeners on their toes, and it's that very air of unpredictable inevitability that plays out across the likes of 'Night Of Long Knives', 'You And I', 'For The Kingdom', 'Blood', 'Manhunter' and 'Throne Of The Dawn' and makes 'Light...' such an irresistible draw.

Produced once again by Ward (be honest, if he was in your band you'd want him behind the mixing desk?!), the sound is both huge and crystal clear; the ringing tones of Kiske's vocals sitting just atop an ever complex, yet enthralling web of interlocking instrumentation. Given the praise heaped on the aforesaid debut it would have been easy to serve up the same once again, but Unisonic have strengthened their credibility by upping their game in every quarter... I haven't stopped playing it for weeks now, and each time it just seems to get better!

And at that I haven't even mentioned the stunning cover art…

Dave Cockett

TRI STATE CORNER – 'HOME' *(Drakkar)* Genre: Hard Rock

One of the things I love about writing for Fireworks is receiving an album to review that is a little different from the norm and something that in any other circumstance would have completely passed me by; such is the case with Tri State Corner.

A quintet consisting of three Greeks, one German and one Polish musician, TSC take their Greek heritage as a basis for incorporating a traditional Greek instrument into their music, the bouzouki. However, rather than using it as a mere occasional embellishment, the bouzouki is virtually the predominant instrument featured, including all the solo parts. Yet TSC do not sound like a cheesy Eurovision Song Contest entrant, the hard-hitting contemporary Alternative Rock sound of the band cleverly integrates the bouzouki alongside the modern down-tuned guitar riffs to produce a unique but very accessible sound that you think shouldn't work but does, while also adding a certain extra gravitas to the Greek folklore-orientated 'Mother Earth' and the album's sole ballad 'Kapia Stigmi'.

A concept album, 'Home' takes up the story that began on previous album 'Historia' (an album that has now become a must-buy for this particular reviewer), with the thought provoking topical lyrics benefitting from the dramatic style of the music it encompasses. Strip away the bouzouki and you're left with modern sounding yet extremely Melodic Rock that brings to mind the likes of Linkin Park, Nickelback and Foo Fighters, while the riffs of 'Bigger Than You' and 'Déjà Vu' are pure Alter Bridge, but when you incorporate the bouzouki to this sound you're left with something very unique sounding indeed.

It won't be to everybody's tastes for sure, but I urge the more adventurous amongst you to give it a chance, you won't be disappointed.

Ant Heeks

TROUBLESOME BUCKS – 'BLIND FAITH' *(Independent)* Genre: Hard Rock

Spending years playing covers of one of the finest Blues Rock players of all time is bound to rub off just a little. Northern Irish trio Troublesome Bucks dish out plenty of Rory Gallagher

worship on their debut album 'Blind Faith' and for the most part do a passable impression, but let's face it, reaching the heights of Gallagher's talents is a mountain few are equipped to climb.

There is much to admire about TB, however. Those years spent as a covers band have turned them into a fiercely tight group whose understanding of the way the greats work has informed their playing and song-writing no end. Front-man Giles O'Hara (who even plays a Gallagher-like battered brown Fender Stratocaster) uses his wonderful gravelly vocal tone and nuanced riffs to act as a perfect top layer on the telepathic understanding of Owen Anderson and Adam McIvor's rhythm section.

'Warrior Rising' and 'Suffocate' weave nicely crafted song-writing and catchy hooks incorporating lots of slide guitar and Bluesy riffs but it's the excellent title track that adds in touches of The Black Keys which stands this pounding Blues Rock gem above the rest.

However, for all the terrific song-writing and playing on display 'Blind Faith' is missing that vital spark to really set it alight. Troublesome Bucks clearly possess a huge amount of talent whose tightness was years in the making. But those "making of" years were spent honing the songs and styles of one man. It might take a while yet before the Bucks find their own sound.

Dan Bond

UNHERZ – 'STURM UND DRANG' *(Massacre)* Genre: Hard Rock

I remember getting a tape sent to me in 1985 by a Punk Rocker friend of mine after I'd moved back to England and it was by the very Germanic Punk band Bohse Onkelz. That was the first name that came into my head when I started playing this album, particularly when I heard 'Pogobraut' (loosely 'Pogo Bride') and 'Viva Rock 'N' Roll' (self-explanatory or Selbsterklarend). 'Pogobraut' is a party song made for festivals that has BO written all over it style-wise. I'm guessing it's BO who? The closest comparison I can come up with is the Pop Punk of Green Day after they've had a few beers and been out in the midday sun for a while – a rather joyous romp with sing-along "la, la, la's"; 'Viva...', likewise, is Germanic BO sounding Rock 'n' Roll.

Now you may say what has any of this got to do with Melodic Rock? Well, surprisingly, despite their Punk leanings and attitude, they have plenty of Melodic Rock songs up their metaphorical sleeves.

'Der Fur Dich' (Him For You) follows straight on from the keyboard heavy intro and features nice sonic melodies interspersed amongst the pretty fast beat with an impassioned melodic chorus and plenty of "whoas" to finish. Vocalist/guitarist Felix Orschel and fellow guitarist/backing vocalist Andy Arnold prove they have a nice ear for melody on 'Zeugen Der Zeit' (Witnesses Of Time) and punctuate the song with nice stabbing riffs. Bassist Jochen Wallauer and drummer Christian Bogert hold the rhythm all nicely together and another slice of melody is created with the passionate driving Rocker 'Drei Kreuze' (Three Crosses).

'Ein Lied Fur Unsere Feinde' (A Song For Our Enemies) is a pacy Rocker, again with oodles of melody swimming around and they prove they can also do the Rock ballad some justice with 'Der Erste Schritt' (The First Step) showing a mature, balanced nature with a somewhat epic feel and a pleasing solo.

As befits their Punk heritage though, 'Wir Sind Hier' (We Are Here) is as anthemic as the title suggests on the chorus and is a another up-tempo Rocker to boot and the anthemic, punchy nature is also evident on 'Krieger Des Lebens' (Warriors Of Life) which also ends with plenty of "whoas".

Buy the digi-pack and there are two bonus live tracks; 'Schmerz Neu Definiert' (Newly Defined Pain) which is a raucous Punk anthem in the style of Die Toten Hosen and 'Seite An Seite' (Side By Side) from 'Die Wahrheit liegt Dazwischen' ('The Truth Lies In Between') album.

If you can get past the German language, which even for me is not that easy to assimilate, then you might find that Unherz are a band worth investigating.

Carl Buxton

UNITED NATIONS – '2014' *(Steelheart Memories)* Genre: AOR

For the fifth release in the series of 'Lost U.K. Jewels', AOR gurus Rob Evans and Primo Bonali have deviated slightly from their own template, because whilst Stoke's United Nations are indeed a lost U.K. Jewel, in this case they've completely re-recorded songs from their mid-1980s catalogue. With key members not interested in taking part, drummer Chris Mooney, bassist Peter Hankey and keyboardist Chris Stonier have recruited guitarist Neil Fred Thomas and respected singer Lee Small to do justice to their legacy, re-doing several tracks from their sole 1986 album, a few intended for the never-released follow-up, and one new song to test the water.

Another band with a Pomp edge, UN offer up a bit more variety than most of their 1980s peers, from the multiple tempos and time changes of the epic opener 'The Night That Lasts Forever' and the subtle Toto-like nuances of 'Looks That Kill', to the brand new heartfelt ballad 'I'll Be Your Man' and straight-ahead Rocker 'Black Heart'. Some would probably say that a band like United Nations sound too dated in 2014, but to tell the truth these guys were already behind the wave when it hit back in the 1986 and so transcend the need to be anything other than true to themselves. Also, there have been times when Small hasn't been a good fit for some of the projects he's collaborated in, but here his Glenn Hughes-isms ride over the soulful 'First Move' and the grandiose 'Violation Of A Nation' like it was just meant to be. For further proof, check out the truly memorable 'Shock To The System' to hear what a great singer can do for a song.

Paul Hulme's production is quite warm sounding and a good attempt at recreating a past style with modern technology. There's none of the prevalent wall to wall overdubs and too-loud mastering, and the songs have room to breathe because of it. I think the old-school subtlety of this album will limit its appeal, but if Hughes sang on an early 1980s Pomp/AOR record and was banned from screaming, it would probably sound something like this.

Phil Ashcroft

VANTAGE POINT – 'DEMONIC DINNER DANCE' *(Power Point)* Genre: Heavy Metal

Having recently reviewed the pre-album EP, 'High Maintenance Girlfriend', from Edinburgh's Vantage Point, I have to say that I was immensely looking forward to pulling up a chair for their 'Demonic Dinner Dance'; a release which not only marks the band's third full album, but also their tenth year in existence.

Two numbers from the EP are repeated here, its title track and the unforgettably catchy 'Reverse The Charges' proving equally irresistible when placed on a longer release. Both are packed with Hammondy goodness and reveal a strong 1970s sound akin to Uriah Heep at their early best; guitarists Liam Kane and James Mitchell careening a mix of steely riffs and energetic solos into the keyboard work of guest Matthew Bartlett. Tried and tested the pair of tracks may sound, but the stupendously addictive nature with which they are delivered makes them into huge rollicking burst of fun that stand up remarkably well to repeat listens.

Elsewhere, this loosely conceptual album leans on other U.K. acts and their classic pasts for inspiration, the likes of Iron Maiden, Judas Priest and a little UFO evoked across the album. There's the theatrical, almost muscularly Saracen like 'Seating Plan I' (there's also a 'Seating Plan II' and 'III' – that's a lot of guests!), the galloping bass led title track and the slightly more technical 'Conversation Stopper'. Singer (and bassist) Murray Graham utilises a versatile approach throughout and while you'll maybe (well definitely) find better "pure" singers out there, his energy, passion and power marks him out as perfect for this style.

Side two (for VP are keen to suggest 'Demonic...' would make for an excellent vinyl release) begins with 'Last Word Freak' and while Vantage Point are keen to point out that it's their heaviest track to date, it is also the only real clunker in sight, what with the machine gun snare and shouty vocals morphing into sub standard early Anthrax or Suicidal Tendencies.

However with the rest of the album striking a clever balance between cracking musical execution and slightly tongue in cheek theatrical retro-ness, your invite to the 'Demonic Dinner Dance' ensures a night not to be forgotten…

Steven Reid

VARIOUS ARTISTS – 'LIGHT MY FIRE: A CLASSIC ROCK SALUTE TO THE DOORS' *(Cleopatra/Purple Pyramid)* Genre: Rock

"Classic Rock stars have come together to salute The Doors". Various musicians and artists hailing from some of the best Classic Rock bands around, such as Deep Purple, Yes, Grand Funk and Rainbow, have created a sixteen track tribute album full of The Doors' major hits.

The great thing about TD, and perhaps a reason as to why their sound is really hard to re-create, is how each version performed differs from the last. It's what made each released track and live performance so unique; it was a captured essence of their emotion at the time of being played.

Jimi Jamison (Survivor), guitarist Ted Turner (Wishbone Ash) and pianist Patrick Moraz (Moody Blues) take on the first track, 'L.A. Woman', which is sadly an instant let down from what you would be expecting when you hear about a salute to The Doors. This is a heavily produced composition, especially for a song that originally has a real raw and exposed feeling about it - the guitar and keyboard are far too clean cut; so much so that it strays too far from a "Doors-esque" track. The over-production seems to flow throughout the album – with the use of vocal effects to achieve that lower octave than Jim Morrison can reach; a prime example being 'The Crystal Ship'.

'Roadhouse Blues' is somewhat different. With Leslie West playing guitar and Rod Piazza on harmonica and vocals, there is also one overwhelming groove thrown into the mix. Brain Auger, a Jazz and Rock keyboardist, really hits the accents and pronunciations that Ray Manzarek knocks out.

One of the best representations on the record would be 'Touch Me'. The Rockabilly twang from Robert Gorden points to the original mood of the song. His drone and tone works extremely well for 'Touch...' and with Nik Turner (Hawkwind) on sax it is "Halleluiah" like praise when it comes to the sax solo.

There are a lot of interpretations of what these artists think could be The Doors; the music is something that is so hard to analyse, understand and interpret, yet is never so clear; but that is the beauty. Here there are some first-class portrayals and there are some like 'People Are Strange' that miss the mark completely. Jim Morrison and The Doors had great chemistry,

VANITY BLVD – 'WICKED TEMPTATION' *(Noiseheard)* Genre: Hard Rock

Vanity Blvd burst onto the Swedish Sleaze Metal scene a few years ago – yet another Scandi band riding the wave of 1980s nostalgia, trying to become the Female-Fronted equivalent of Crashdiet? Maybe, but VB proved there's more to them than meets the eye – they survived the struggle and now return with their second effort 'Wicked Temptation'. With the previous album, their debut 'Rock 'N' Roll Overdose', the Swedes served us a slice of slightly generic Sleaze Metal – but have they, as fine wine generally does, improved with time?

Press play and you will know – oh yes, they do. The opening track 'Dirty Rat' has front-woman Anna Savage doing her best Lita Ford vocal impersonations against the background of sleazy guitar riffs that neither the early Hanoi Rocks nor Crashdiet would be ashamed of. With 'Miss Dangerous' the last thing this band is about to do is to slow down and this tendency continues throughout the entire album. Just listen to 'Thrills In The Night' driven by the mad, raunchy guitar riffs or the powerful, anthemic chorus of 'Do Or Die'. There is also 'Had Enough' which seems to be a rip-off of... (insert the title of any Lita Ford power ballad here) as it starts but develops into a full-blown Hard Rock track enriched with a modern-sounding guitar solo. The rare moments of slowdown consist of the emotionally laden mid-tempo 'Desperate Heart' (which may remind you at times of the Estonian girl band Vanilla Ninja's better moments) and the Pop Rock piece 'Falling Down' (somewhat forgettable if it hadn't been for the splendid guitar solo).

'Wicked Temptation' is definitely an outstanding record in many respects – a cross between the rough street-wise attitude of the early Mötley Crüe and Lita Ford's sensual vocals, enhanced by the 21st century production and a generous portion of feisty melodies. It's a dirty, gritty and downright nasty Hard Rock album with a solid sleazy vibe to it – and proof Vanity Blvd have come a long way since '...Overdose' or their earlier self-produced EPs. Once a promising yet rough young band, now they're ready to conquer the world and believe me we're going to hear more about them yet, enumerated among the best players of the Sleaze Rock league. Mad, bad and... obligatory to know.

Alexandra Mrozowska

they really knew how to play with the dynamics in a song and this is something that you just can't recreate.

Lara Kisel

VICIOUS RUMORS – 'LIVE YOU TO DEATH 2: AMERICAN PUNISHMENT' *(Steamhammer/SPV)* Genre: Power Metal

A seriously underrated act who (in my humble opinion at any rate) have been on top of their game for the best part of thirty-five years now, Vicious Rumors are the first and last word in quality U.S. Melodic Power Metal.

Contemporaries of the Bay Area Thrash explosion that sent seismic shockwaves around the globe in the early 1980s, whilst VR certainly know how to crank up those riffs theirs is a much more traditional sounding brand of Metal influenced by giants such as Judas Priest, Savatage (pre 'Gutter Ballet' of course) and Accept. Guitarist and main song-writer Geoff Thorpe has been the only constant in the band since the beginning, and although it's true to say that they've seen their fair share of band members come and go over the years, under his expert patronage they've always delivered to the most exacting of standards.

Most fans would probably agree that in terms of market penetration they were at their absolute peak in the mid to late 1980s/early 1990s, but as a song-smith Thorpe has remained remarkably consistent and resilient for much longer. Recorded last October at several North American shows in support of their sizzling 'Electric Punishment' album, 'Live You To Death 2' is a blistering indictment of VR at their most comfortable in their natural habitat (on stage).

Opening their account with a rampaging run through of the title track from 1988's sophomore album 'Digital Dictator' (still their best to these ears), Thorpe and his compatriots lay waste to everything and everyone that stands before them. Slamming into their set like a nuclear tipped strike, the band are literally on fire as they deliver a fistful of minor league classics both old and new – how does the likes of 'Worlds And Machines', 'I Am The Gun', 'Mastermind', 'You Only Live Twice', 'World Church', and 'Towns On Fire' (amongst others) grab you?

Thorpe and fellow six string gunslinger Bob Capka are in fine form – all broiling riffs and rapid fire solo bursts – whilst the high octane vocal screams of front-man Nick Holleman are reminiscent of an amped up Geoff Tate from twenty-five years ago. Fittingly their set draws to a close with the anthemic 'Soldiers Of The Night' (from the debut of the same name), one of the pivotal tracks that set the ball rolling all those years ago.

Uncompromising, razor sharp Power Metal from a band that never fails to deliver!

Dave Cockett

WAMI – 'KILL THE KING' *(Metal Minds)* Genre: Heavy Metal

A "super-group" featuring Doogie White, Marco Mendoza and Vinnie Appice was an interesting prospect in itself, but who is Iggy Gwadera? Well, it seems he was guitarist in the imaginatively titled Anti Tank Nun who supported Thin Lizzy in Poland some time ago and his guitar skills greatly impressed bassist Mendoza. So much so, that he felt compelled to bring him in when this project was first suggested in order to work with this talented young man.

The album title 'Kill The King' points to the fact that you wouldn't really expect anything other than it being a huge nod to Dio, Rainbow, etc. but this is a more up to date sound with awesome harmonies and a far more modern overall approach.

A stand out track for me, 'The Resistance', could've been written by White, but, as with the rest of the album, this track was penned by a Polish team consisting of Jarek 'Chilek' Chilkiewitz and Wojtek and Piotr Cugowski. They must have a great interest in Scottish history with lyrics like these, but not quite so sure about the out of tune piper in the closing bars…

I was very impressed with 'Young Blood' which, like three of the other tracks, has a co-write credit given to Gwadera. His solos are killer throughout, but it feels like he's really put his stamp on this one - great feel. The haunting 'I Don't Want To Lose You' is a beautiful ballad and I just adore the harmonies and acoustic playing, reminiscent of Mr Big's 'To Be With You'.

Gwadera certainly lives up to the hype – what an amazing player. Still a teenager, it's hard to figure out just how someone so young could have quite so much Yngwie Malmsteen, Eddie Van Halen and Ritchie Blackmore in their playing, but he has it in spades. Add to that, the unquestionable talents of Mendoza and Appice, this is a perfect vehicle for White to give what I feel may well be his best vocal performance to date. With so much talent and overall brilliant songs, this can't fail to be in my "Top 10 Of 2014". Absolutely brilliant.

Sue Ashcroft

WINTERGARDEN – 'THE NEW VICTORIAN' *(Mighty Music)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

When it comes to the selling of albums there is one universal fact – radio airplay can make all the difference in the world. Answer me this, have you ever heard Fatal Smile, Human Fortress, Vanishing Point, Opeth, or Knight Area on American or British main radio stations? While these bands sell well to their diehard fans and in their native countries; here in America especially, they remain largely unknown and unheard of.

Denmark's Wintergarden has released one impressive CD here. Picture the sounds of Lacuna Coil, stir in the heavy guitars of the awesome Alice In Chains and add the epic refrains of Persephone's Dream and you have Wintergarden. Instantly likable, 'The New Victorian' is filled with attention grabbing songs like the heavy opening track, 'Breathe' which features Sevendust guitarist Clint Lowery. After that, reach for the volume and listen to the synthesizers of 'The Release', the nasty 'Cinderella', the solemn vocals of 'Log On', and the six minute closing track 'Fade' that showcases excellent bass and electric guitar work and truly is a must hear for fans of adeptly played Metal.

Wintergarden released their debut EP 'Steampunk Deluxe' back in 2011 with this being their first full-length release. While many bands require a release or two to find a sound that they feel works for them, Wintergarden has found that sound and brings to the table a strong contender within the genre of Melodic Metal. Comprised of husband and wife Miriam and Blake Gardner along with guitarist Darren Davis and mixer Kane Churko (In This Moment, Ozzy Osbourne, Five Finger Death Punch) '…Victorian' has many things going for it.

For starters the mixing between the various instruments is done extremely well. What is irritating is when the instruments seem to be competing for a place in the song. But what is heard on this album is a masterful blend of all the individual parts of each song that come together wonderfully. Each track is written with the vocal range of Miriam Gardner in mind; really, at no time does her voice come across as forced. The songs are heavy, melodic, almost Progressive and use each musical bar to create an emotion that brings to the listener those feelings that the song-writer is trying to convey.

So, let's hope radio in general gets its act together and starts adding bands like Wintergarden to their playlists; I know I have a better chance of Royal Hunt playing at my next beer bash than that for to happen. But in any event, buy this album, support Wintergarden and add 'The New Victorian' to your collection. You'll be glad you did.

Franco Cerchiari

WOLF – 'DEVIL SEED' *(Century Media)* Genre: Heavy Metal

Did the Devil himself have anything in common with conception of either Wolf or this album in particular? We don't know, but guessing by the title of their seventh effort however, we might assume it was a kind of wicked auspices. No matter if supported by the forces of darkness or not, it's certain that these Swedes have unleashed a Heavy Metal beast with 'Devil Seed' and are now ready to watch it devour its prey (the oblivious reviewers exposed to its unrelenting hunger, for example).

Having the ominous, guitar laden-instrumental piece 'Overture In C Shark' as the album's opener, Wolf take us to hell and back again with the fast-paced, furious gallop of 'Shark Attack' and the aggressive 'Skeleton Woman'. It's a full-throttle Heavy Metal roar with angsty, dark lyrics, feisty vocals and equilibristic guitar solos. This tough hell-ride continues throughout the entire record, with the likes of the Black Sabbath-infused 'Surgeons Of Lobotomy' or the slightly Accept-esque and powerful 'Back From The Grave'. 'Frozen' has singer Niklas Stalvind ripping his throat off in the best Rob Halford-esque manner and guitarist Simon Johansson putting out a real arsenal of fiery guitar riffs. 'I Am Pain' is yet another highlight with its massive, throat-ripping chorus. And if you really thought the mellow intro to 'Killing Floor' portends a sombre ballad to finish the album with, you must've been misled with the initial wailing guitar sounds. As proven by Stalvind delivering his trademark screams against the wall of furious guitar licks, it's no slowdown until the acoustic, melancholic guitar outro, making one realize the word 'deceleration' simply doesn't exist in Wolf's vocabulary.

Apart from the band's technical prowess and unfading potential, 'Devil Seed' proves one thing – these Swedish wolves can really roar and bite hard, and they do both throughout the entire album. Having declared the album is "Heavy Metal to 11", the band did their best to keep up with this Spinal Tap-ish mantra; the result is an album you can't play without turning up to eleven and making Nigel Tufnel proud. All in all, Wolf has offered their listeners a choice that is relatively simple – either you decide yourself on exploring the dark corners of your mind and reviving your love for an old-school Heavy Metal sound or the beast will come for you. And I am fairly certain you'll enjoy its guitar-laden roar either way...

Alexandra Mrozowska

WOVENWAR – 'WOVENWAR' *(Metal Blade)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

Wovenwar is the new full time project for the members of As I Lay Dying - guitarists Nick Hipa and Phil Sgrosso, bassist Josh Gilbert and drummer Jordan Mancino – who have partnered up with vocalist and guitarist Shane Blay from Oh Sleeper. The band made the decision to carry on working together after the initial arrest of front-man of AILD Tim Lambesis and thought best to keep the legacy of AILD intact and start something fresh and new - during this unfortunate time the band have been very busy in the studio and the outcome is their new debut self-titled album.

It starts with the unusual 'Foreword', a short one and half minute piece that is very atmospheric through classic piano and other keyboard effects. Vocals are embedded deep within as six string comes in. It is unexpected and seems to throw the listener off balance – a great deploy as guitar penetrates the ear drum at a vast speed with the first main track 'All Rise'; first impressions are they have taken a more melodic and simply structured approach.

An American style of Heavy Metal seems to be the AIDL members line of attack, this record is heavily guitar led stirring any solo enthusiast. They keep a slight Extreme Metal essence through blast beats and extreme down-tune rhythm sections as evident in 'Death To Rights'. 'Prophets' is the stand out in a crowd of many - vocally powerful and musically grand, it's a shame it appears last (with the exception of an outro).

There are a lot of similarities between each track that give it predictability, making no real eruption either half way through the album or within any track. This is not necessarily a negative note as every song hooks you right in and the musicianship that they are known for is still captured throughout. Wovenwar's debut album is highly engaging and seems to hit the spot on the "Guilty Pleasure" list; it is an album that you just can't help but find entertaining.

Lara Kisel

X-DRIVE – 'GET YOUR ROCK ON' *(Frontiers)* Genre: Hard Rock

The name sounds more like a computer game than a Rock band, but X-Drive is a new project initiated by as yet unknown guitarist and song-writer Jeremy Brunner. The Oregon native made his way to Los Angeles armed with just a batch of basic song structures and set about enlisting the required talent to turn his dream into reality and make what became the debut album 'Get Your Rock On'.

Credit to Brunner then, for not only has he the songs to make people sit up and take notice, but he has surrounded himself with a top-notch cast. The rhythm section consists of bassist James Lomenzo (White Lion, Megadeth, Pride & Glory) and drummer Fred Fischer (Midline), while adding his exemplary vocals to proceedings is Keith St. John (Burning Rain, Montrose), who provided the lyrics. Demonstrating that the whole is equal to the sum of its parts, these guys sound like they've been performing together for years, with Brunner's contribution fiery when needed but also content to stay in the background and not smother the material.

Stylistically it harks back to the late eighties and early nineties with a moody take on Melodic Hard Rock a la Tesla, Winger, Shark Island and Great White, though remains contemporary sounding thanks to the production. Encompassing a healthy mix of styles from pulsing Rockers like opener 'Love's A Bitch', 'Steppin' On The Rock', 'Rattlesnake Eyes', 'Love Breaks The Fool' and the title-track. There's three ballads of contrasting moods including the bittersweet 'Baby Bye Bye', the achingly beautiful 'Beyond The Angels' and the acoustic 'Change Of Heart' while first single 'California' has a mid-tempo Summery West Coast feel that conjures up images of the State the title implies. 'Turn The Noize Down' is a vitriol-fuelled rant that grooves along on a down 'n' dirty Sleaze Rock riff, and 'Just Can't Stay' is a Whitesnake style Bluesy piece complete with a neat tempo change for the chorus.

Expertly produced by Andy Johns (Led Zeppelin) just before his tragic death in 2013, and suited with a great cover (further evidence that Frontiers is gradually moving away from the

atypical air-brushed design of old), this is a winner in every department. Let's hope this well become more than a 'project' so they can build on this excellent beginning.

Ant Heeks

XY – 'MEMORIES NOW DREAMS' *(Sliptrick)* Genre: Modern/Alternative

I reviewed XY's previous album 'Flying' a couple of years ago and remember it as being an "okay"; a few memorable tracks of fairly easy on the ear Alternative Rock, full of electronica and effects. Whilst 'Memories Now Dreams' is more of the same, this time XY have taken it to a whole new level with a much heavier, stronger sound.

'The Sign' starts off simply enough, gentle vocals over an atmospheric rhythm; it's a fifty second intro before 'One Last Stand' kicks in with a roaring, dirty Nu-Metal blast. Featuring the snarling, growling vocals of Shawter from fellow French Rockers Dagoba, I'm not normally a great fan of guttural roaring vocals, but it certainly works well here, combining with William Morabito to give a powerful mix of controlled aggression against XY's own sound with a similar theme continuing through 'Crush You'.

Anyone who knows XY will also be aware of their influence and love of all things Avenged Sevenfold and 'Deathbat' is their worthy tribute to Ax7, a strong Rocking blast in familiar style. Much as these influences remain close to the surface, there's a big chunk of Linkin Park too, especially in the likes of 'When You're Not With Me' and 'Rebirth'. 'It's Not Too Late' is a highlight, despite being a complete change in tempo, it's lone piano picks out the tune creating a ballad of despair and loss, building to an evocative guitar solo; it's XY's equivalent of Guns 'N' Roses' 'November Rain'.

'Virtual Life' and 'Welcome To My Place' are a couple more solid Rockers before ending in epic style with the nine minute 'The Best Is Yet To Come'. It's an appropriate end to the album as 'Memories Now Dreams' is a huge step forward for XY.

They hold true to their Alternative Rock influences, which to be fair they have never tried to hide, even going as far as producing an album of Ax7 covers in the past, but a heavier approach has carved out a more distinctive style of their own. Based around the South of France, (Nice/Cannes – playground of the rich and famous) they still have that party animal vibe but have successfully combined that with some strong song-writing and arrangements to produce an album packed with genuine Rock quality and legitimacy in its own right.

Ian Parry

YES – 'HEAVEN AND EARTH' *(Frontiers)* Genre: Progressive

This is the 21st studio release from this seminal Prog band in their forty-six year career and their first since 2011's 'Fly From Here' which featured Benoit David. Glass Hammer's Jon Davison has since taken over vocalist duties and unlike Benoit has been given the chance to make his mark in a big way on the album, contributing co-writes on seven of the eight tracks (he wrote 'Light Of The Ages' himself). Roy Thomas Baker produced the album.

'Believe Again' is a catchy opener with excellent vocals from Davison and fine backing vocals. It is quite a "soft" track and sets the tone for the album. Steve Howe plays a trademark Jazzy solo and Geoff Downes' keyboards are very simple and reminiscent of Asia's sound. 'The Game' has an AOR ring to it and Howe is more prominent with some typical guitar flurries.

Downes puts his stamp on 'Step Beyond' with a simple keyboard sound which some may find quite annoying, Howe occasionally plays a heavy riff which is sadly lacking on the majority of the album. 'To Ascend' is primarily an acoustic driven number with Downes' piano backing it up; this is the weakest track on the album and contains some Anderson Cosmic style lyrics harking back to the seventies.

'Light Of The Ages' has some wonderful steel guitar from Howe and again is a slower number, however it does contain some pumping bass from Chris Squire. 'It Was All We Knew' has an intro which reminds me of GTR's 'The Hunter' which of course Howe played on and Downes produced in the mid-eighties; Howe again reminds us that this is Yes with snippets of his familiar guitar work.

Final track 'Subway Walls' clocks in at nine minutes and begins with a keyboard intro which again sounds as if it should be on an Asia track. Squire finally springs to life and reminds us what he is capable of with some superb bass lines. Alan White also has the chance to shine (his drumming is very understated throughout the rest of the album). The middle part of the track has a Downes' Hammond duel with Howe's Jazzy style guitar. This is the "Proggiest" song on show.

Many traditional Yes fans from the early days will struggle to come to terms with how "Prog-lite" the album is, that said I don't think it was recorded with them in mind; fans old and new will enjoy the Roger Dean artwork. Davison does a commendable job and I hope that he is given the chance to record another album with the band and maybe then we may hear some more traditional Yes sounding tunes.

Az Chaudhry

ZEPHRUS – 'LIQUID SUN' *(Shire Town)* Genre: Progressive

The press release for this album states, "Zephrus musical canvas is painted with brush strokes of Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Steely Dan, and more". Wow! It also states that "Zephrus could be described as akin to Classic Rock, with deep-track originals (?) and epic guitar solos". Get it on the player... this is just up my street.

Strangely, when I did put it on, it turned round the wrong corner and disappeared into the sunset. It is hard to figure exactly what this trio are trying to be. The opening track 'Liquid Sun' is a low key, Folky acoustic tune, not something which should grab you by the throat and make you want to stay for the rest of the journey. 'Fraxure' has a little more body to it, with an extended guitar solo, but it is far from epic, and 'Valve' is slow paced, almost background music at the start, and sounds like it's going to break from its chains about 1:45 in, but doesn't. This proves to be a theme throughout the album as it lacks power and emotion, with none of the tracks having anything that actually moves you. 'Valhalla' turns a little Jazzy, which turns me off straight away, and the guitar does nothing for me at all, while 'Circles' sounds very Brazilian. There is a bit of life on here with 'Waiting For Nothing,' but it doesn't go anywhere, and the start of 'Drive' is almost heavy with distorted guitar which borrows quite a lot from Pink Floyd's 'Nile Song'. The other track that borrows a bit is 'Limbwalker', where the vocals sound a bit like Yes, right at the beginning, but it is not Yes by a long way.

So, this album does nothing for me, coming across mainly as background music. It actually has a hidden track with a solo acoustic, vocal track, where the singer (I assume it's Corey Cranston) taps his feet while he plays. At one point the tapping goes out of time, which probably tells you everything.

Andy Brailsford

RE-ISSUES

ACCEPT – 'ALL AREAS – WORLDWIDE' *(Cherry Red/HNE)* Genre: Heavy Metal

This Accept live double disc album is a little different from the norm, in that the songs contained herein are actually taken from two shows that were a year apart; firstly, their 1993 'Objection Overruled' tour, then the following 'Death Row' tour in 1994. Now, anyone that knows me well knows that I love the band but consider the three albums they made after the re-union with Udo Dirkschneider in 1992 a complete and total waste of time. So really, I was not coming into this review with any great hopes.

However, it has to be said that the first fourteen tracks are Accept at their Teutonic best, mixing classics like 'Starlight', 'Princess Of The Dawn', 'Metal Heart', 'Fast As A Shark' and an incredible eleven minute 'Balls To The Wall' with four songs from '... Overruled' which, surprisingly, are damn good, even if 'This One's For You' is just 'Breaker' re-written; I really need to revisit that album. That said, the remaining six songs on the second disc, all from 'Death Row', do nothing to dissuade me that I was wrong in dismissing that album so decidedly back in 1994. Lacking melody and any sense of fun, songs like 'Sodom And Gomorra', 'Stone Evil' and 'Death Row' are really hard to sit through, especially given all the fantastic tracks we've previously just heard.

The album was re-titled 'The Final Chapter' in the U.S.A. and Japan, but as we know now it certainly wasn't, with the new Accept going from strength to strength with Mark Tornillo on vocals and Dirkschneider doing very nicely with his solo band. As the cliché goes, this is one for completists only. For fans, or the curious, really wanting to get a taste of Accept at their peak, the 1990 release of their Osaka 1985 show, 'Staying A Life', is still the place to go.

Bruce Mee

DEEP PURPLE – 'LIVE IN GRAZ 1975' *(earMUSIC)* Genre: Rock

Here we have yet another Deep Purple live recording, this time capturing the Coverdale/Hughes/Blackmore/Lord/Paice line-up. Billed as 'previously unreleased', I take issue with that. It's certainly the first time to my knowledge that this recording of Graz 1975 has been released on its own, but Purple collectors like myself who own the double CD 'Deep Purple MK III – The Final Concerts' will find five of these eight tracks already present on there, hence us classing this as a re-issue.

Opening with the classic 'Burn', Purple were clearly keen to focus on their most recent release at that time, 'Stormbringer'. There are three selections from that album performed in succession, from the title track to the rollicking take of 'Lady Double Dealer' and the Glenn Hughes/David Coverdale duet 'The Gypsy'. It's easy to see how much Purple had evolved at this point, with the two lead singers happily alternating with the introduction of songs while Blackmore noodles whenever the mood took him. You have to wait until the epic take of 'Mistreated' ends before you get anything from the legendary Gillan era. That comes in the form of 'Smoke On The Water' which sees Coverdale notably change the lyric of "we all came down from Montreux" to "they all went down to Montreux', while Hughes handles the second verse.

Ian Paice is phenomenal on 'You Fool No One' which offers Jon Lord a chance to stretch out, before they launch into a rare rendition of another Gillan era song, 'Space Trucking', where Coverdale delivers the lead vocal and Hughes joins in on the chorus. It serves as another band showpiece, with it meandering to a massive twenty minute version with all manner of tangents thrown in – the actual song itself only lasts for about six minutes of that.

It's a fine snapshot of Purple Mk III, prior to Blackmore's departure, and there are some great moments along with some long, overblown musical improvisations which you either enjoy or find a little tedious – 'Mistreated', 'You Fool No One' and 'Space Trucking' collectively make up forty-eight minutes of this eighty minute recording. A great release for collectors and die-hards, but with no 'Highway Star' present here, if you already have 'Mk III – TFC' all you are gaining is alternate versions of songs you already have from the Paris show.

James Gaden

DEEP PURPLE – 'PURPENDICULAR' *(Cherry Red/HNE)* Genre: Rock

Hot on the heels of the re-issues of Deep Purple's 'Slaves And Masters' and 'The Battle Rages On', it's only logical the trilogy of turmoil is finished with 'Purpendicular'. '...Masters' saw a change of singer, with Ian Gillan ousted in favour of Joe Lynn Turner. 'The Battle...' saw Turner ousted in favour of Gillan, which only led to more tension between the vocalist and guitarist Ritchie Blackmore. After 1993 tour, Blackmore quit. The remaining dates were fulfilled by Joe Satriani, and then the hunt for a permanent guitarist was on.

Purple had tried to replace Blackmore once before, with gifted American six stringer Tommy Bolin, and while the album 'Come Taste The Band' was excellent, the resulting tour only had fleeting moments of greatness and the band imploded in 1976, only revived again in the mid-1980s with 'Perfect Strangers'. Blackmore's second departure saw the arrival of another American, Steve Morse, famed for his work with Dixie Dregs and Kansas.

Morse was a good fit for Purple – he had nothing to prove in the guitar stakes, having already won numerous accolades. He had a very different style to his predecessor, resulting in 'Purpendicular' having a much needed freshness. The staccato attack of 'Vavoom: Ted The Mechanic' has a vibrancy conspicuous by its absence on 'The Battle...' and the band feel like they have been let off a leash. 'Loosen My Strings' is a beautiful number which builds and builds, while 'Sometimes I Feel Like Screaming' starts gently before the whole band kick in for one of the many highlights of this superb record.

Morse at no point overplays in any song, his contributions and his solos are perfectly balanced with everybody else – indeed it sounds like a full band effort with no one individual taking the lead. Roger Glover once stated to me that the bulk of the writing was done stood in a circle, with everyone just pitching ideas in, and that comes across. There aren't many riff Rockers, tracks like 'Somebody Stole My Guitar'

and 'Cascades: I'm Not Your Lover' would tick that box, but most of the songs still Rock without forcing the guitar to the fore. 'Rosa's Cantina' is more bass driven and 'Hey Cisco' rides along on an infectious drum beat.

'Purpendicular' is, for my money, a bit of a masterpiece. Every track is great and it proved there was life after Blackmore. Personally, I felt they never got near the quality of this album with their subsequent releases, until 'Now What ?!' was issued last year. With the inclusion of the lively Japan only bonus track 'Don't Hold Your Breath', this re-issue gives you even more reason to revisit where the Morse era started. Superb.

James Gaden

DREAM THEATER – 'THE STUDIO ALBUMS 1992 – 2011' *(Roadrunner)* **Genre: Progressive**

The decline of the CD as the world's favourite music medium has resulted in record companies trying new ways to sell (or re-sell) their back catalogues via expensive, expanded versions, re-masters, added DVD's, 5.1 mixes and a host of other clever marketing ideas. Whilst it can lead to possibly spending stupid amounts of money on music you mostly already own, there are also bargains to be had in the massive influx of reasonably priced box-sets that are currently flooding the market. So, for anywhere between twenty and thirty quid you can pick up ten slices of Dream Theater's rich history in one box, ranging from 1992's ground breaking classic 'Images And Words' to the band's first Mike Portnoy-less outing; 'A Dramatic Turn Of Events' from 2011.

Housed in cardboard slipcases within a substantial, space-saving box, all their full-length albums are included in their original form, and listening to each one in order, it's amazing how much quality music the band has produced. Each disc has plenty to recommend it, from the perfect blend of power and melody through 'Images...' and 'Awake', their record company and Kevin Shirley's attempt to make them more accessible on the much maligned (by the band) but still underrated 'Falling Into Infinity', and their susequent middle finger to the industry with the brilliant, self-produced concept album 'Metropolis Pt.2 - Scenes From A Memory'. Despite it being one of my favourites, they probably went a little too far with the double-disc 'Six Degrees Of Inner Turbulence', the first disc featuring five of their most experimental pieces whilst the wonderful forty-two minute title track was a real throwback to an earlier style.

From that point, an angrier Portney had an adverse effect on relationships with other founding members John Petrucci and John Myung, along with less emphasis on Jordan Rudess' keys and the lighter side of singer James LaBrie's voice. LaBrie himself had blown his voice out back on the 'Awake' tour and took ten years to get back to full strength, but 'Train Of Thought' was a little heavier but one-dimensional, and 'Octavarium' and 'Systematic Chaos' both had their stellar moments but were probably their patchiest albums. Ironically Portnoy's last album before his acrimonious exit was their best for quite a while, the drummer's continued attempts at cookie monster vocals notwithstanding. After their 2010 drum auditions Mike Mangini joined the band for the return to their roots album '...Events', which not only contained many great examples of DT's complex song-writing, but also a few mellower and concise tracks.

This box is great value for money and provides about thirteen hours of a band who took different influences to create its own genre. If you were considering checking out the band or just wanted new discs to replace your well-worn originals then this box is ideal. It's mildly annoying that the albums aren't re-mastered, it doesn't include their 1989 debut 'When Dream And Day Unite' or the awesome 'Change Of Seasons', or that there isn't a booklet so you get no other information besides a track listing and who produced each album. The band are so prolific that there will doubtless be a fuller box-set with all the bonus tracks, covers and fan club exclusives somewhere further down the line, but that probably won't work out at around £3 per disc.

Phil Ashcroft

BON JOVI – 'NEW JERSEY – DELUXE VERSION' *(UMC)* **Genre: Rock**

Though it was 'Slippery When Wet' that turned Bon Jovi into the global megastars they remain to this day, it is the 'New Jersey' album that many consider to be the band's finest work – it's always been my favourite, not just because it includes my two all-time favourite Jovi songs, 'I'll Be There For You' and the simply wonderful anthem 'Blood On Blood', but because '…Jersey' demonstrated more maturity in the song-writing department with bigger arrangements and better lyrics than its predecessors. 'Keep The Faith' was a good album, 'These Days' had its moments, but since then, a string of more and more mediocre albums that shows no signs of improving means that '…Jersey' will never be bettered.

As 'Bad Medicine', 'Born To Be My Baby' and 'Lay Your Hands On Me' will testify, the Jon Bon Jovi, Richie Sambora and Desmond Child hit-making partnership had been perfected, but it's the album tracks that exhibited the greatest improvement. Aside from the aforementioned epic 'Blood…', the amazing swaggering Rocker 'Homebound Train' and the summer party anthem '99 In The Shade', 'Wild Is The Wind' and 'Stick To Your Guns' saw JBJ infiltrate his band's sound with his obvious love for Bruce Springsteen – great songs, but looking back now, was it songs like these that would ultimately become the benchmark for Jovi's later insignificant output?

The first disc is rounded out by a cover of 'The Boys Are Back In Town' that was their contribution to the 'Make A Difference Foundation' album, 'Love Is War', an excellent moody Rocker that was the B-side of 'Living in Sin' and one of my favourite Jovi songs, while the acoustic version of '...Baby' is how the song was originally envisaged and features powerful vocal contributions from Richie Sambora.

Disc two of this deluxe version adds a number of previously unreleased demos that were earmarked for the album – remember that '…Jersey' was originally supposed to be a double album entitled 'Sons Of Beaches'. Though slightly rough around the edges, the re-mastering has given them a decent sound quality. Ironically, much of the material that was left by the wayside back then is so much better than the majority of the current Jovi output.

'Judgment Day' and 'Growin' Up The Hard Way' are very similar in structure, with big "na na na" hook-lines – very reminiscent of 'Born...' so it's obvious why they didn't survive, while the melody of 'Full Moon High' is also very catchy. 'Love Hurts' is a decent all-out Rocker, though clearly Sambora borrowed the riff for 'Rosie', a track on his 'Stranger In This Town' classic. The appearance of Sambora's talk-box unfortunately can't lift the Sleazy Blues of 'Let's Make It Baby' above average for me, but 'Backdoor To Heaven' is a lighters-in-the-air power ballad in the vein of 'Never Say Goodbye', while 'Now And Forever' is more of a slow-burning ballad with good chorus and excellent Sambora solo. 'House Of Fire' was brought in by Child and Jovi gives it a decent run-through, but its co-writer Alice Cooper's version is superior, while 'Does Anybody Really Fall In Love Anymore?' was eventually recorded by Cher, yet neither version is likely to topple Kane Roberts' awesome rendition as one of my all-time favourite songs. 'Diamond Ring' has a somewhat spookily Gothic feel and far removed from the acoustic version that appeared on '...Days'.

The demo of '...Wind' is pretty close to the final version, simply missing the acoustic intro; likewise '...Guns' is very similar, though with much more acoustic guitar than electric. However, the original '...Train' adds a wonderful drawn-out Bluesy harmonica intro and extended middle section.

The DVD naturally includes all six promo videos (with an extra "alternative" version of '...Medicine') and the 'Access All Areas' documentary of the album's ensuing tour, a film that is short on musical performances but is a nostalgic look back in time at Jovi at their peak, yet the exhausting tour almost saw the end of the band.

Whatever your opinion of Bon Jovi is today, you can't deny that 'New Jersey' is a bona-fide classic.

Ant Heeks

ERIC CLAPTON – 'JOURNEYMAN' *(Duck/Audio Fidelity)* **Genre: Blues/Soul**

This genre defining album from Eric Clapton has now been re-released as a limited edition hybrid SACD (Superior Audio Compact Disc). This is a good choice of an album to be listened to with such clarity; the synth heavy and clear guitar sound of 'Journeyman' certainly benefits from this treatment.

Originally released in 1989, the Armani-clad Clapton enlisted an all-star cast to contribute to this high profile album. To name just a few – Robert Cray, Phil Collins, Daryl Hall and Chaka Khan – they all leave their mark to various degrees and at the time boosted their own career profile as well as the overall image of Clapton as the go-to Rock star.

Putting the all-star aspect of the album aside, the album has some great songs. The Stadium Rock standard 'Bad Love' and opener 'Pretending' made a big impact at the time and in fairness still hold up well now. However, there are some Bluesier old-school Clapton songs to be devoured within such as 'Old Love' and the ballad 'Before You Accuse Me'. The artist travels back in time even further than the 1960s and 1970s and includes a version of 'Hound Dog', which on paper seems a bit pointless but works well.

Guitar work aside, this album shows off Eric Clapton as a fine vocalist, less fragile than his other recordings (there, I said it); here he exudes confidence and quality.

The worthiness of this album is indisputable and now released on this SACD format for audiophiles, purchase will be essential for many.

Rob McKenzie

FAIR WARNING – 'THE BOX' *(Steamhammer/SPV)* **Genre: Hard Rock**

Germany's Fair Warning have a history that dates back some twenty years and more, when singer Tommy Heart teamed up with Ule W. Ritgen of Zeno/Uli Jon Roth to record their first self-titled debut album which came out in 1991. They quickly became a fan favourite in Hard Rock circles and have over the years cemented their place in the upper echelons of that genre, playing to rabid Rock fans around the world and releasing quality albums time and again.

And this brings us nicely to the five disc box-set called 'The Box', which contains the albums 'Go!', 'Live And More', 'Four', 'Brother's Keeper' and 'Aura'. If you haven't heard the band's music before then what better way to rectify that, than to get yourself a copy of this collection for a special low price? If however you do already own these albums (but you are a completist), then I must add a word of caution. The five releases contained within this re-issue do not have any bonus material or extra tracks on them; in fact all of the bonus songs on the previously released limited or special edition versions of these albums have been removed and only the original versions of these records appear here; there isn't even any form of booklet or historical notes. Saying that, for less than £15 where else can you find five albums filled with such glorious Hard Rock? Nowhere is the likely answer.

So, sixty-five Melodic Rock tracks full of palpable energy and that wonderful lead guitar work of Helge Engelke showcase a band who have been writing and playing superb music for over two decades. From the sixty-five songs on offer I'd highlight 'Man On The Moon', 'Eyes Of A Stranger', 'Save Me', 'Heart On The Run', 'I Fight', 'Eyes Of Love', 'Don't Keep Me Waiting', 'Generation Jedi', 'The Cry', 'Hey Girl', 'Falling' and 'As Snow White Found Out'. But to be honest, any of the others could be listed because there really isn't a duff track amongst the five albums that make up this set.

Considering the budget price, this collection cannot be faulted and if you're new to Fair Warning and their music or just want everything they put out, then you cannot go wrong in terms of buying this; it's well worth those hard earned pennies.

Ian Johnson

FALLEN ANGEL – 'CRAWLING OUT OF HELL' *(Killer Metal)* **Genre: Heavy Metal**

Whether you love only new music favoured by the devil or you're a staunch supporter of the "Classic Metal" era becomes largely irrelevant in this case – this is a monumental Heavy Metal album in anyone's money.

Hugely influenced by King Diamond (right down to the corpse paint and genital pinching vocals) New York's Fallen Angel advocates a glorious Gothic attitude on their debut album 'Crawling Out Of Hell'. It is a frankly stunning work that draws on those classic influences but squeezes out something that feels refreshingly different in 2014.

'The Reapers Shall Gather', 'Dark Lord' and 'Watching' charge onwards with Power

Metal gusto and falsetto vocals in a whirlwind of Heavy Metal plunder leaving hooks swirling in your head long afterwards. At twenty tracks long it looks like a Hardcore Punk release, but the addition of foreboding interludes adds to the atmosphere and leads you into the next run of songs, never letting the album drag. The superb drumming doesn't go unnoticed as double bass attack after exquisite hi-hat shuffling played through a ten-tonne hammer that beats every track into shape.

FA were once contemporaries (of sorts) to the Classic Metal brigade. A one-time demo in 1985 was both the beginning and the end for FA and it's taken them close to thirty years to pull this album together. Why? Well, frankly, who cares? Originally released in 2010, this re-release of 'Crawling Out Of Hell' can only help to further Fallen Angel's deserved recognition. Why they didn't 'make it' all those years ago is anybody's guess, but they're here now and you would be mad not to get on board.

Dan Bond

JOHN WETTON & RICHARD PALMER-JAMES – 'JACK-KNIFE'/'MONKEY BUSINESS' *(Cherry Red)* Genre: Rock

This is described as a "scrapbook" and certainly 'Monkey Business' is a long ragbag of ideas and sketches with some merit but only some. 'Jack-Knife' was actually the name of the project the two put together with John Hutcheson, the album originally called 'I Wish You Would' (which is the opening track here). Palmer-James was of course the King Crimson lyricist who took over from Pete Sinfield and Wetton is obviously well known for a multitude of works. '...Knife' was apparently all done in ten days and certainly represents them having a good time.

That's not to say there aren't some interesting moments. '...Would' has a nice sassy syncopated beat and laidback Funky feel, plus sexy guitar and synth solos, 'Too Much Monkey Business' is simply a Pub Rock Rockabilly pastiche and the cover of 'You Can't Judge A Book By The Cover' adds superfluous swing. 'Confessions' is a different matter; dirty bass abounds and organ blasts place it beautifully in the 1970s, all commerciality attended to along with a gorgeous trilling solo. In fact a few of these could be part of that chart friendly singer/song-writer decade; 'Walk On Heaven's Ground' may have a probing Proggy verse, but never forgets the sunshine and passes a flute along with some "sha nah nah's" to delight whilst drums tumble like a rock pile.

Inconsequential it may occasionally be; it is nothing compared to '...Business' the twenty-four tracks of which contain some right old bores. Perhaps that's unfair, fans will relish the chance to hear studio conversations and snatched sketches of music in development, but others will hover over the skip button.

The title track (again) remains a bar band workout but the crowd seem to like it, 'Confessions' (again) remains Funkily fine and 'The Night Watch' is refreshing and as pure as a mountain stream. 'Woman', '(False Start)' and 'Untitled' are just studio chatter and scraps of stuff, wisps of wonder which just frustrate. And there's lots here, 'The Laughing Lake 2' has moments of feeling their way in the studio before the fully realised piece, with a quintessential English brittleness and surprising Pink Floyd feel, makes you smile. They do a similar thing with 'Starless'; Folky and piano workouts that are gossamer thin. And yet when 'Rich Men Lie' tries some Reggae and charms rather than repels, with bongos, it almost seems worth the wait.

Wetton has done a lot, the big stuff will be on the tip of the tongue of course, but don't forget Roxy Music; he has a talent that transcends genre and narrow definition... that should be celebrated. And it is much in evidence here, but in patches; this is mates enjoying themselves – whether you will too depends on how much of a fan you are.

Steve Swift

MAN – 'BE GOOD TO YOURSELF AT LEAST ONCE A DAY' *(Cherry Red Records/Esoteric)* Genre: Progressive

Fair do's and well done Cherry Red, for this rather attractively packaged re-released (originally in 2007) re-issue of Man's well regarded 1972 studio album. The original was a jam-based affair, carrying just four tracks, two of which, 'C'mon' and 'Bananas', became staples of Man's live sets, or 'Manthems' if you will. That's not to say that 'Keep On Crinting' and 'Life on the Road' let the side down at all – the quality of the music is sustained throughout.

The tracks are played and performed by what was then a "new" Man line-up, with Micky Jones (guitars/vocals), Terry Williams (drums and percussion) and the returning Clive 'Clint' John (guitars/vocals), joined by Phil Ryan (keyboards/vocals) and Will Youatt (bass/vocals). That's a lot of vocalists, by the way, for an album that features so few vocals!

In what is undoubtedly a treat for Man fans, the sleeve notes for this re-issue are provided by Man legend Deke Leonard, who comments: "If you are familiar with the band's history, you will, no doubt, have noticed that the line-up doesn't include me. That's because the bastards had just kicked me out". Nevertheless, Leonard provides a detached and objective view of the album ("the first after my unjustified expulsion"), noting that it is "full of big, airy, expansive soundscapes, each with the power of a steamroller, steered with the touch of a watchmaker, and delivered with the swagger of a gigolo."

I'm not sure I can improve on that description, and I must say it's hard not to admire Leonard's (possibly slightly tongue-in-cheek) admission that "they certainly benefitted from my absence."

This re-issue includes two bonus tracks – an early instrumental version of 'Bananas' and a piece entitled 'Rockfield Jam', recorded in Spring 1972 when Leonard and bass player Martin Ace were still in the band.

Also included is a reproduction of 'Man's Map Of Wales', an entertaining map of... er... Wales that was put out with the original vinyl release, with Man's family tree (or 'Family Jungle') up to that point reproduced on the flip side.

This is an excellent re-issue of a more than decent album. Those drawn to Man's brand of boozy, woozy, Bluesy Space Rock, with or without "subtle grace", will find much to enjoy in the original music, while the bonus tracks and Leonard's sleeve notes offer new fun for those presently unfamiliar with this re-issue who are thinking of "upgrading" earlier versions. So go on, be good to yourself at least once today. You know what to do!

Michael Anthony

MEAT LOAF – 'BAD ATTITUDE' *(Cherry Red/HNE)* Genre: Rock

This is the 30th Anniversary edition of Meat Loaf's fourth studio album, originally released by Arista in November 1984, and re-issued here by Cherry Red Records under licence from Sony Music Entertainment U.K. Ltd. There is no bonus material, but it is, nevertheless, a very attractively presented digi-pack. It comes complete with a sixteen page booklet which carries extensive sleeve notes, courtesy of the ever reliable Hugh Gilmour, and a whole clutch of high-quality pictures, including shots of live performances and pertinent memorabilia.

Musically speaking, the perceived wisdom is that 'Bad Attitude' was a return to form after the Steinman-less 'Midnight At The Lost And Found' and that it includes material that veers towards the heavier end of ML's repertoire. Certainly the presence of guitarist Bob Kulick gives credence to the latter point – check out his work in 'Nowhere Fast' and 'Sailor To A Siren', for example – while efforts have clearly been made to blend tracks from several different song-writers and produce an album that has both coherence and flow.

ML's then-keyboard player, Paul Jacobs, contributes significantly (with Sarah Durkee) to the song-writing, as does John Parr. Two Steinman compositions are featured, both of which had been previously released – '...Fast', recorded by Fire Inc. for the 'Streets Of Fire' soundtrack, and 'Surf's Up' from Steinman's 1981 solo album 'Bad For Good'. Other notable features include the appearance of The Who's Roger Daltrey on the album's Rocking title track, and the vocals of Clare Torry (best known for her work on Pink Floyd's 'Dark Side Of The Moon') on the album's most successful single 'Modern Girl' (or 'Marching Girl', as my five-year-old daughter will have it).

The 1980s production values are much in evidence, particularly in relation to the drum sound, and that sense of "spaciousness", by no means unique to this album, that, to my ears, always made albums from this period sound like they were recorded in an empty auditorium (or a big shed). That said, these are big compositions that benefit from "space", and which sound as though they are intended for live performance; just add an audience!

Meat Loaf always has been at least as much about live performance as studio recording, with the Rock Opera vibe of 'Bat Out Of Hell' and his other best material whetting the appetite for show time. To that extent '...Attitude' was a valuable and timely addition to his back catalogue.

Those who are looking to refresh old vinyl or early CD copies, or purchase 'Bad Attitude' for the first time, will find this a nice package, though the absence of bonus material is a little disappointing and will doubtless places some limits on sales potential.

Michael Anthony

NULL PARADOX – 'GERTRUDE AND GRACE' *(Independent)* Genre: Progressive

Ambitious, or confusing, Null Paradox isn't a simple project to decipher. Is it a book? Is it a band? Is it a live circus-like extravaganza? Is it a collective of "cranks" who come together to further the exploits of all of the above? Yes… yes it is. To add to the confusion of shuttling between linked and similarly themed, yet cryptically difficult to "get" websites, a quick check for some background finds reviews for an album called 'The Onion And The Ants - Gertrude & Grace', by Null Paradox which dates back to 2011 which has an identical, bar being one song shorter, track-listing; despite this the press release states that the more simply titled 'Gertrude & Grace' was released earlier this year. So is this new? A re-issue? Confused? Well that seems to be the aim.

Anyway, we're here to talk about the music and, I suppose, the concept which apparently binds all of the above together – "Blood sisters, one with a damaged soul and the other who contains the light of life, facing the ultimate question….Love or destiny?" Oh and the world's at stake too - I nearly forgot that.

Yet for all the ambition and complexity contained in this project, the result, once you place the disc in the player, is a polite journey through Progressive themes that never quite come to much more than straight ahead pleasantness and reasonably unchallenging Rock. Think Karnataka without the passion or hooks, or Mermaid Kiss without the stark beauty.

Lead singer Robyn Christine is more than capable of leading the line, so much so that she almost sounds bored and disinterested, a huge variety of notes employed to convey a monotone delivery. This lady can sing (as can her backing partner, Rachel Matz) but there's little to suggest she melds perfectly with these particular musical surrounds. However the fault lies more with a lacklustre set of songs which reveal little excitement as they are adequately performed and unexcitedly produced.

There's bags of talent on show on 'Gertrude & Grace' and a huge amount of heart and soul has been poured into the project as a whole (the live show looks spectacular), yet there's little on the album itself to draw you back into the world the whole thing aims to create.

Steven Reid

RICK WAKEMAN & THE ENGLISH ROCK ENSEMBLE – 'OUT THERE' *(Cherry Red Records/Esoteric)* Genre: Progressive

Whilst Rick Wakeman is one of my Prog heroes it has to be said that not all his output can be considered as essential. He set the bar unbelievably high with the early albums 'The Six Wives Of Henry VIII', 'Journey To The Centre Of The Earth' and 'The Myths And Legends Of King Arthur And The Knights Of The Round Table' so following those was always going to be a considerable stretch, even for a man of Wakeman's talent. The majesty and pomp of those albums have never been matched. I can't help wondering whether his music works best with older subject matter as here he pays homage to the men and women who lost their lives on the Space Shuttle.

Subsequent albums have all had their moments but the consistency of those iconic albums hasn't been there. I recall not being convinced by this album when it first appeared in 2003 as Wakeman had seemingly moved away from the pure Prog style and introduced a simpler Rock offering. Also, for this album he'd chosen to use the vocal talents of Damian Wilson who I find to be a somewhat inconsistent performer. His recent contributions to Threshold and albums by Headspace and Star One have been first rate, but at other times I find his vibrato and pitch changes rather grating. In fact I still recall Wilson's performance on Wakeman's 'Live in Buenos Aires' DVD rendered it absolutely unwatchable from my perspective.

The very best moments on this album are therefore when Wakeman indulges in his familiar keyboard Prog-ness during the instrumental sections. Elsewhere the songs don't really have the vocal refrains or choruses to make them memorable; it's the guitar and keyboard solos that have stuck in my head.

The album is bookended by two lengthy numbers, the title track and 'The Cathedral Of The Sky'. The former has a typical Wakeman synthesiser opening, a phrase that recurs throughout the piece. I can't help thinking the extended solo section is a touch overwrought compared to his best work. The latter harks back to those early albums with its huge Church Organ sound and Choir.

Elsewhere there are three shorter numbers that to my ears don't sound like Wakeman songs, not that they are bad they just don't that the grandiose feel I expect from him. The other members of the band, Lee Pomeroy (bass), Tony Fernandez (drums) and guitarist Ant Glynne, shine throughout.

The re-mastering has made the sound a little sharper so those who own the original may want to upgrade.

Gary Marshall

ROBIN GEORGE – 'HISTORY' *(AngelAir)* Genre: Melodic Rock

A musician who has collaborated with Robert Plant, Glenn Hughes, Phil Lynott (and so the list goes on) should be a household name in Rock circles. Yet for Robin George that mainstream breakthrough never quite arrived. Yes he was a Kerrang! cover-star and achieved a chart hit with the wonderful 'Heartline', however George remains one of those figures for those "in the know", while being hugely respected by his peers. In recent times he has been revealing some of the gems from his past, this release being amongst the most interesting.

Heading back to the period between 1979 and 1981, 'History' is the debut album that never was, recording sessions squeezed in during studio downtime, drummer Dave Holland (Judas Priest/Trapeze), bassist Pino Palladino (The Who/Joe Walsh) and keyboardist Mark Stanway (Magnum) all dropping everything when the phone-call came to tell them the studio was free. Add in a guest bass slot from none other than Phil Lynott and this really is a star-studded session.

'History' opens the album, guitars stabbing through the bass thrum, George showing what a wonderfully engaging voice he had even at a young age. The song would go on to be released as a 12" single, the expectation being that Arista would follow up with the release of the album. As so often happened back then, things didn't work out that way, the album being shelved for an amazing thirty-three years! An embryonic, less polished version of 'Heartline' is a wonderful insight into where George was at the time, the Lynott infused 'Showdown' a heavier, yet synth driven joy, the Ted Nugent covered 'Go Down Fighting' a slow building melodic delight. However these tracks are not alone in captivating the imagination, the slightly Funky 'Castles In The Sky' is an acoustic hit in the making, 'Tonight Was Meant To Be' a cross between what would go on to make Whitesnake huge a few years later and The Eagles' accessibility.

Re-mastered by Robin George himself, 'History' has been kept as an honest appraisal of its time, a little tape hiss and abuse of the sound limiters still in evidence. However don't let that put you off experiencing the 'History' of one of the U.K.'s most under-sung Melodic Rock song-writers in his most honest, raw form.

Steven Reid

SIDEWINDER – 'SIDEWINDER' *(Cactus Curtain Music)* Genre: Heavy Metal

Google 'Sidewinder' and you'll find a plethora of bands of that name; this one though is the three-piece Power Trio from Texas, originally formed back in 1984 and what we have here is a re-issue of their 1989 debut album. Built largely on the guitar virtuosity of David Valdez who also doubles up on vocals on several tracks, his playing is pretty typical of that mid to late eighties Rock era. Some crunching catchy riffs, a bit of melody and harmony thrown in and plenty of top speed shredding lead work. He is more than capably supported by Paul Pederson on drums and JJ Pena on bass... and a fine job they do too.

Opener 'Ready To Rock' hits exactly the spot you'd expect from the title – big riff and chorus along with some strong guitar work that is reminiscent of Dokken and George Lynch at their best. 'Cruisin' On The Levee' is more Southern based Rock and there are other strong tracks such as 'Flying High' and 'Dreamers'; all of which according to the accompanying press release picked up a fair level of airplay back in 1989. The album lists Raul Garcia as vocalist (no longer a member of the band) but here he displays a strong range, hitting the top notes in a Hard Rocking Geoff Tate style. 'Breakaway' in particular sounds similar in tone to early Queensryche.

But that's really as good as it gets. Although re-mastered for this CD re-release, the quality is distinctly demo sounding – hollow and raw. The band certainly show all the technical ability and a precision to their playing, but no real chemistry comes across, perhaps because of the poor quality of the recording but there's little feel or genuine passion in the playing.

Sidewinder are still treading the boards in their home state and I'm sure that they will kick up a storm live as there is clearly huge amounts of ability here, but this recording does them a disservice. It's exactly what it says on the cover - a re-issue of an album that wasn't good enough to make any real impression back in 1989 when this style of music was at its most popular. Twenty-five years on, it's still not good enough; a nostalgia release, that could have been half decent if they had re-recorded the songs to give them a more up to date feel, but in fact is just true to its self, as an aging demo from the vaults of the past.

Ian Parry

TERRAPLANE – 'BLACK & WHITE' *(Cherry Red/HNE)* Genre: Rock

They're back! Oh hang on... it's just a few dates. They're playing again! Oh, it's their Christmas show. There's talk about a reunion! Oh, they have their own stuff to do. Thunder are close to a Rock national treasure, teasing us with odd shows, leaving a wonderful litany of albums, keeping those memories intact. A bit like Terrorvision...

And, like a Rock family tree, we now have the baby steps of Thunder. Terraplane boasted vocalist Danny Bowes, guitarist Luke Morley and drummer Harry James, three quarters of the mighty and much loved Thunder. And at the time, the mid-1980s, Terraplane were loved too and expected to be next big thing.

And now to the history part... they released two excellent albums and split because they were not as popular as was expected. The label thought they were a Pop band etc. Except that, in that common refrain, this is actually the real deal and if you don't know it, you can just look at Thunder for the quality, add some Poppy brightness and enjoy every moment.

There is not much better than 'I Survive', the leadoff single, boasting a brightness and a chorus so catchy the Dept Of Health put out warnings; they did this wonderful stuff for fun. Add the original album closer 'Couldn't Handle The Tears' with its Glammy stomp but sweeping strings, wonderful Bowes voice and real heft. Plus opener 'Don't Walk Away' with a keep-your-ear-cocked little organ and such assurance, the bouncy 'When You're Hot' with perkiness Barbara Windsor would have struggled to emulate and real drama in 'I Can't Live Without Your Love' complete with Morley U.S. Melodic solo to knock any socks off.

But all eleven tracks can find a place in your heart, this is stunning stuff. The extras are plentiful but mainly versions and live retreads; 'Beginning Of The End' is a Gospelly treat though. Should you have this? Of course... why? Think of it as a pre-Thunder album or think of it as great music; either will work.

Steve Swift

STEELEYE SPAN – 'LIVE AT LAST!'/'SAILS OF SILVER' *(BGO)* Genre: Country/Southern/Folk

This two album set consists of the Steeleye Span's last album before they broke up in 1978, 'Live At Last!', and their subsequent reformation album 'Sails Of Silver', which was released two years later in 1980.

What was strange about the 'Live…' album was that seeing as this was recorded on the band's farewell tour, you would have expected it to be made up like a greatest hits package from their previous ten albums. This was not the case however; instead the band chose to record an album of brand new songs with only one or two exceptions. Those being the re-jigged version of 'Saucy Sailor' that was incorporated in part into 'Black Freighter' and as the band put it, a reconstruction of 'The False Knight On The Road' originally off the 'Please To See The King' album. This album then was both a thank you and a goodbye from a band that had I suppose defied the odds, by becoming one of the first successful Folk Rock bands and the enthusiasm both from the audience and SS can be felt throughout the whole of this release.

The second disc in this set saw SS reforming two years later with a somewhat changed musical outlook. Instead of the more traditional musical pieces, the band opted for a more AOR friendly approach, the band's vocalist Maddy Prior went as far as saying that the band wanted to adapt their musical style so as to make the new music sound fresh and vibrant. Did they succeed? The emphatic answer is yes. With tracks like 'Sails Of Silver', 'Gone To America', 'Barnet Fair', 'Senior Service' and on through to the more Folky ballads of 'My Love', 'Let Her Go Down' and 'Longbone' we hear music that moves through the Pop Rock (of the time) and weaves in Steeleye Span's love of Folk. We also hear a band who are so obviously glad to be back together and doing the thing that they love the most, making music.

Now of course this package will appeal mostly to the Spanners (the name given to long time fans) who want to have everything recorded by the band. And the re-mastering of the music by Andrew Thompson is certainly a great reason to re-buy these albums, as he has made them sound vibrant and alive and much more up to date, more than their thirty years of age would suggest. I have to say though that I came to the music of this band quite late in life and I have enjoyed (re) discovering these two wonderful albums and can say that if you like the lighter side of Rock, you won't be disappointed by 'Live At Last!' or 'Sails Of Silver'.

Ian Johnson

VICTORY – 'DON'T GET MAD, GET EVEN' *(Yesterrock/Universal)* Genre: Heavy Metal

"You know when they preserve the moose?" "You're like a preserved moose?" Derek Smalls says he is, in the wonderful 'This Is Spinal Tap'. Victory are like a procession of shoulder pads, the banker with the big phone and Judd Nelson's career (allegedly)... stuck in the past, but is there anything wrong with that?

We love nostalgia, particularly when times are hard. Victory were formed in 1984 with luminaries such as Ted Nugent screamer Charlie Huhn, along with a later arriving Herman Frank; their second album produced a hit, 'The Check's In The Mail' and so, perhaps inevitably considering their frequent reunions, the album is here again. And glory be, this is apparently a collector's item and it does seem to be the case, sort of, it's on the net for about £20.

No re-mastering here, the sound sells itself; it's from the time that bass forgot, but meatier than hairier colleagues from the late 1980s. The big hit is beautifully simple and enjoyable, you know what to expect, you don't have to worry, you can leave it to them; those gang response choruses, those rough riffs and vocals...

There's something a little more here though, it's the opportunity to be something else; when the scene really kicked in there was little chance to deviate from the blueprint. And so we have an undeniably sassy Hair Metal riff but a gorgeous AOR tough chorus and Triumph accessible solo ('She's Back'), whilst 'Turn It Up' goes to several places, 'Thunderstruck' riff and beat, narrative sleazy vocals, all wrapped in dirt and sinewy goodness. But then 'Sneaking Out' pulses and broods until you are begging for it to explode; it never does, just sticks its tongue out and turns away.

Yes, some of this conforms and many will ask why they would bother, but Victory are still around, still enjoyed and those "Classic Band" Rock Cruises are very popular these days, aren't they? This is a surprisingly varied release (within tight parameters of course) that may surprise many others; it certainly entertains. Lie back and let them do the work. Chicken in a basket? Maybe, but with extra sauce.

Steve Swift

VIRGIN STEELE – 'THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL PT's I & II' / 'INVICTUS' *(Steamhammer/SPV)* Genre: Heavy Metal

I first came across Virgin Steele many years ago when one of their songs was played on the legendary Friday Rock Show (R.I.P. Tommy Vance). I can't remember the actual track but it was from their still wonderful 'Guardians Of The Flame' album which came out in 1983. I loved the grandiose over the top Metal so much that I rushed out next morning to my local record shop (remember them?) and bought the album and ever since VS have been a long time Metal favourite at Johnson Towers. So as you can imagine when SPV announced that they was doing a series of re-issues from the band's back catalogue, all with bonus discs containing bucket loads of extra material, I was one happy bunny.

These two VS re-issues of 'The Marriage Of Heaven & Hell Pt. I&II' and 'Invictus' have everything a fan of overblown Metal could want; namely heavy memorable guitar riffs, galloping drums, pounding bass lines and a vocalist who can roar with the best of them. But don't forget the individual quality of the songs themselves which they also have by the pound. From 'Marriage…' the highlights include 'Weeping Of The Spirits', 'Trail Of Tears', 'The Raven Song', 'I Wake Up Screaming', 'Twilight Of The Gods' and 'Rising Unchained', whilst 'Invictus' gives us 'Mind, Body, Spirit', 'Through Blood And Fire', 'Defiance', 'Dust From The Burning' and 'Sword Of The Gods'.

As you can imagine with forty-three songs spread over the two separate albums it is very hard to choose. When you have listened to all of songs from these two original albums, which you'll agree is a good start, you will get onto what makes these two re-released albums even more special; that is the inclusion of another nineteen bonus tracks and that's quite a lot to contend with as well. The main bulk of the bonus songs can be found on 'Invictus' where you'll find fifteen unreleased or live in the studio songs on a second disc. Of these I'd say the 'Fire Spirits Acoustic versions' of 'Dark And Distant Future', 'Unholy Water', and Trail Of Tears' are the standouts; that said the other twelve songs are no slouches either.

If you are new to this band and like a bit of Melodic Metal, then these two albums are a fine place to start to investigate VS, although if you do enjoy them it will be an expensive job to catch up with their whole back catalogue. But for the long term fans of Virgin Steele, the extra tracks alone make re-buying these albums more than worth your money and effort.

Ian Johnson

MULTIMEDIA

ALICE COOPER – 'SUPER DUPER ALICE COOPER' *(Eagle Rock)* Genre: Hard Rock

There surely can't be much more to tell in the Alice Cooper story, but here we have a documentary about the band, and the man who ultimately was Alice. The disc takes a while to start, about five minutes before we actually get to the title, but it is one of those things that you start watching and before you know it you have watched it all.

The way this is presented is quite interesting as people involved in the Cooper story are interviewed, but you never see then being interviewed during the programme, rather you get to see footage, or pictures, of the actual event being discussed. Things like the band performing right at the start of their careers when they were but mere lads. A lot of this is out there, but there is stuff in this that I have never seen before. The whole lot is here; the chicken, the meeting with Shep Gordon, the meeting with Bob Ezrin and how Cooper met his wife Cheryl. Learn how the band got the idea for 'School's Out' from a U.S. sitcom, see the original album with the paper panties (which I used to clean the record with and subsequently lost), and about the concert where many of these, in all colours, were dropped from helicopters over the audience.

There is quite a bit of stuff in here that I was unaware of, and I thought I was a knowledgeable Cooper fan. What was really interesting to hear was how the Salvador Dali episode, where Dali created a hologram of Cooper, was the very beginning of the end of the name as a band, as, long-time friend of Vince Furnier, Dennis Dunnaway, was left disappointed that he was not involved.

Having met and spoken at length to the surviving members of the original band, I thought that there were bits that were missed from here, but reckoned that to get everything in here would need a running time of around twenty-four hours. However, those bits that I thought were missing were actually covered in the bonus material "deleted scenes" section. There is also bonus material of rare (?) footage and interview scenes.

A very engaging documentary that will most likely tell you something you don't already know.

Andy Brailsford

BLACKBERRY SMOKE – 'LEAVE A SCAR – LIVE IN NORTH CAROLINA' *(Earache)* Genre: Country/Southern/Folk

I'm still a new convert to the charms of the wonderful Blackberry Smoke and have yet to delve into their back catalogue after reviewing the quite excellent 'The Whippoorwill' back in issue 63, so this new live release came as a very pleasant surprise. The Atlanta quintet have been touring non-stop since the release of their last album (that managed to gatecrash the Top 30 this side of the pond) and 'Leave A Scar – Live In NC' is the perfect showcase of their Rockin' Southern/Country/Blues hybrid.

Filmed at Ziggy's in Wilmington, a decent sized venue that appears to have a very homely feel; the carpets on stage and the band's laid-back approach gives the concert the appearance of a gig given in your front room for friends and family – albeit a lot of them! The whole band perform their individual tasks without fuss or any hint of egos, but obviously vocalist and chief guitarist Charlie Starr remains the focal point throughout the show, his voice sounding every bit as good as it does on the studio versions of these songs.

Kicking off with the sublime 'Shakin' Hands With The Holy Ghost', the performance naturally plunders the 'Whippoorwill' album heavily, including excellent versions of 'Pretty Little Lie', 'One Horse Town', 'Lucky Seven', 'Six Ways To Sunday', 'Crimson Moon', 'Ain't Got The Blues' and the title-track itself, while also reserving space for older numbers like 'Testify', 'Up In Smoke', 'Lesson In A Bottle' and 'Son Of The Bourbon'. I don't understand though, why they felt the need to run the closing credits over the rousing rendition of the excellent 'Leave A Scar' that closes the set!

The concert performance is interspersed with revealing interviews and behind-the-scenes footage of the band on the road or at home with their families. All five members come across as down to earth and very humble guys who are taking nothing for granted and are genuinely thankful for their success.

The two CD's that accompany the package include four extra songs that unfortunately didn't make the DVD. I can only assume that these were recorded at a different show, which is a shame as I would have especially liked to see the performance of the beautiful ballad 'Up The Road' with its wonderful Skynyrd-esque guitar solo, while the Groove-Rock of new song 'Payback's A Bitch' is also worthy of a mention.

Blackberry Smoke will be returning to these shores in October, until then this nifty package will do just nicely thank-y'all.

Ant Heeks

MARILLION – 'A SUNDAY NIGHT ABOVE THE RAIN' *(earMUSIC)* Genre: Progressive

In an era when live releases are ten-a-penny, what would motivate a band such as Marillion, who have countless live recordings available from their renowned website, to decide that one particular performance should be available to the wider public? Simple, because it encapsulates everything that's fantastic about this band in their current musical guise, while incorporating their past and being utterly fantastic in the process.

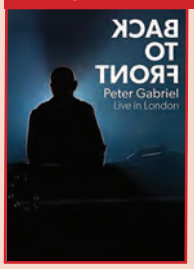
The release in question, 'A Sunday Night Above The Rain', comes from the final night of three from the band's 2013 Port Zealande "weekend", capturing a set that wrings every bead of sweaty emotion from all concerned. All eight tracks from the band's most recent album, 'Sounds That Can't Be Made', are included and while the jaw droppingly recounted 'Gaza' does open proceedings, the rest of the cuts don't follow in sequence; 'Waiting To Happen', where the crowd take over the vocals from a visibly taken aback Steve Hogarth, fan favourite 'Neverland' and the hugely underrated 'The King Of Sunset Town' interspersing the newer cuts.

Visually this double DVD/Blu-ray set is a feast, the picture quality suggesting an elongated promo-video, rather than a full-length live release, while the sound is crystal clear. The setting is quite wonderful and with the band camped in the same venue for three nights running, they look and feel right at home, a light show that would be too costly to carry around the world given full scope to shine. However most dazzling is the guitar display from Steve Rothery, whose fret-work is always beefier and more in your face live, while the keyboards of Mark Kelly build, build and build again on some atmospherically enveloping themes. Visually, it's Hogarth the camera loves, his enigmatic stagecraft ebbing and flowing as he loses himself in the show, extra keyboard fills and guitar licks being the mere icing on his peerless, if deeper than years gone by, vocal delivery. The only slight quibble coming when he "forgets" the lyrics to the only Fish era track included, the otherwise excellent show closing 'Garden Party'; the singer encouraging the obliging crowd to pick up his slack. Honestly, after all these years you'd think Hogarth could attack his predecessor's songs with the gusto they deserve.

That however is the one and only niggle on a live DVD/Blu-ray (and double CD if the mood takes you) that genuinely shows one of the U.K.'s most enduring bands in the most positive of lights. If you've been dismissing Marillion for many a year, it's only you that's missing out and 'A Sunday Night Above The Rain' proves as much.

Steven Reid

PETER GABRIEL – 'BACK TO FRONT: LIVE IN LONDON' *(Eagle Rock)* Genre: Progressive



This DVD covers a show that Peter Gabriel recorded in April 2013 to celebrate twenty-five years since the release of the 'So' album in 1988. Most of Gabriel's shows are elaborate, technical affairs, but this stage looks quite bare, compared to the 'Up' tour for example. Gabriel states that the show is in three parts; the first, which starts with an unfinished song called 'Daddy Long Legs' and then 'Come Talk To Me', 'Shock The Monkey' and 'Family Snap Shot' are done acoustically. Things get a little more "electronic" with 'Digging In The Dirt,' at which point the lighting joins the show. Rather quaintly, it is done very much as it was in the original shows of this period, with a few updates. 'Secret World' has always been a live favourite of mine and it is still excellent on this recording.

The main reason for all this though is to perform the 'So' album in its entirety for the first time. Also, Gabriel re-united his original 'So' touring band from 1986/1987 to do this. Before doing 'Red Rain' they do another new song 'Why Don't You Show Yourself' which was composed for a film project of the same name. 'Sledgehammer' was started by the audience without any encouragement, and 'Don't Give Up' has always been my favourite from the album and sounds excellent here; Jennie Abrahamson performs Kate Bush's original sections brilliantly. Gabriel performs 'Mercy Street', another favourite of mine, while on the floor, with an innovative use of the lights while 'In Your Eyes', with a guest appearance by Daby Toure on vocals, ends the main set. The two encore tracks are 'The Tower That Ate People', which was written for the Millennium show back in 1999/2000 and actually had a tower that came down and ate Gabriel, and the classic 'Biko.'

Extras on the disc include 'The Visual Approach' which is a documentary that lifts the lid on the creation of the live show with interviews with both Gabriel and lighting designer Rob Sinclair, a version of 'This Is The Picture' filmed by fans and a montage

version of 'In Your Eyes.'

As I said, this is not the most technical or spectacular show that Gabriel has staged, but this is a good record of it.

Andy Brailsford

PINK FLOYD – 'THE PINK FLOYD & SYD BARRETT STORY' *(Eagle Rock)* Genre: Progressive

I have formed an opinion, based on many a conversation with fellow fans of the band, that when it comes to Pink Floyd there are two distinct factions; these being the "with Syd Barrett" and the "after Syd Barrett" camps. My rather non-scientific research suggests that age is a significant factor in this split. Seemingly you had to be there to enjoy the Barrett period whereas my own musical enlightenment didn't occur until years after his departure from the band and therefore although, once I discovered PF via the 'The Dark Side Of The Moon' album, I delved into their back catalogue, the Psychedelia of the Barrett era left me colder than the liquid nitrogen in a Heston Blumenthal dessert.

With that in mind I suspect this DVD will be of interest to a select few punters who fit a fairly narrow demographic, although I couldn't help thinking that even the die-hards might find the content frustrating in places with only snippets of live footage being shown when in all probability the entire song was filmed and therefore available.

The documentary is from a 2001 edition of the TV series 'Omnibus' and in places it makes for very uncomfortable viewing. Even before drugs, Barrett was clearly a man walking a very fine line between sanity and madness with substance abuse then tipping him over into full blown bonkers. They may have released his creative genius but certainly they also fried his brain. Ultimately, I'm not sure the documentary ever really gets to the heart of Barrett, what drove him musically or the demons that determined his self-destructive ways.

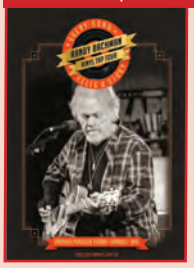
It is deeply uncomfortable watching footage of him tripping out on acid; as someone who's never understood the allure of such substances this only served to reaffirm my thoughts on the subject.

Probably the areas of most interest sits within the bonus material that makes up disc two where there are full-length, and seemingly uncut, interviews with band mates Roger Waters, Dave Gilmour, Nick Mason and Rick Wright which are funny, sad and poignant in equal measure. The description of him arriving unannounced at the studio as PF were recording, ironically, the track 'Shine On You Crazy Diamond' (their tribute to Barrett) and no one recognising the vacant, bloated man before them is sad.

Can I envisage taking this DVD off the shelf and watching it again? Unlikely, but it was interesting to watch it once.

Gary Marshall

RANDY BACHMAN – 'VINYL TAP TOUR: EVERY SONG TELLS A STORY' *(2 Hit Wonder/Farpoint/Paquin)* Genre: Rock



He's not exactly reinvented himself has Randy Bachman, but his radio show, 'Vinyl Tap' (geddit?) has been so popular that it's spawned a show and this rather well presented DVD and CD; songs and stories presented, in a way, like 'An Audience With…' only no cringing.

Set in an old theatre (The Pantages in Winnipeg, natch) on a set which resembles a living room (sofa! rug! etc), the band are one of those "acoustic in the sense that they play a bit quieter" types and Bachman is immensely likeable, letting the stories unfold with a sense of modesty and the kind of gentle humour you often see a kindly uncle show in Hollywood movies.

The songs are here, a beautifully groovy 'American Woman', 'These Eyes' so soft and loving, 'Takin' Care Of Business' and that juggernaut 'You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet', delivered with reverence and love but also sassy drive – it seems ageless.

If he were not careful, this could be seen as a peddling of old wares, a tribute to former glories, with scant bonus features (just two songs). But this is so warm, the use of split screen so welcome, old photos liberally sprinkled around and Bachman is such a chucklesome fella; this is something a bit special. You know the bloke who did the voiceover on 'The Dukes Of Hazzard' TV show? That. He made us feel that he's talking just to us, glass of something warming in hand, fire crackling in the grate, all evening to tell all his stories.

And would you want this? If you're a fan, probably, it's the songs you know done differently and with a very interesting garnish. If you're not a fan? This won't convert you; he is a chortling gent though…

The CD is thirty minutes or so of the music you've just seen. It has a closeness, a calm ambience which brings a smile to the chops. However, without the chat we have little understanding of the context, it's just a "greatest hits" offering; it works with the DVD but not so well alone. Why didn't they include the stories? That's the USP here; rather like selling you a Ferrari and then taking the seats out.

Steve Swift

TARJA TURUNEN & MIKE TERRANA – 'BEAUTY AND THE BEAT' *(earMUSIC)* Genre: Other

The names of Mike Terrana (Axel Rudi Pell, Rage, Masterplan, Artension, Hardline, Savage Circus, Yngwie Malmsteen, Tony Macalpine) and Tarja Turunen (Nightwish, solo) will be ones that are quite familiar to readers of Fireworks. However their work on 'Beauty & The Beat' might not be as well known. This is a project set up by Turunen and Terrana in 2010, so that the two could indulge their passion for Classical Music and new interpretations of old Rock classics, backed by a full Symphony Orchestra and its choir.

This passion has now culminated in the release of 'Beauty…' (DVD/BluRay), a show filmed at the Kongresové Centrum Zlin in the Czech Republic in April 2013. Making use of a full Symphony Orchestra, the two split the show between themselves whilst performing their parts with aplomb, though at times they do appear on stage together.

As for Terrana's part in proceedings, he uses his formidable drumming skills to accompany the other musicians on Classical pieces like 'Barber Of Seville', 'Can-Can', 'William Tell Overture' and 'Eine kleine Nachtmusik' where we see him dressed up like Mozart (the 'Amadeus' film version that is) and acting the fool for the audience, who lap it up. Meanwhile Turunen sings many full Operatic arias backed by the orchestra and its choir and this is probably the first time we really get to see and hear what this young Lady is really capable of. Yes there have been inklings and hints on the songs she has done as a solo artist and with Nightwish, but hearing her perform 'Blute Nur' by Bach, 'Zuneignung - Op. 10, No. 1' by Richard Strauss or 'Song To The Moon' by Antonín Dvořák really shows just how good a singer she truly is.

Interspersed between the Classical Music selections are re-worked Classical/Rock versions of songs like Freddie Mercury's 'You Take My Breath Away', a very clever 'Led Zeppelin Medley', 'Swanheart' from Nightwish's 'Oceanborn' album and couple of Turunen's own songs. Also included are two very interesting show tunes which sees Terrana singing 'Fly Me To The Moon' (on which he does a very good Frank Sinatra impression) while Turunen handles West Side Story's 'I Feel Pretty'.

There is also a companion CD available (sold separately) to this DVD package. Unlike the DVD, for some reason, the concert has been split in to two distinct halves. The first disc features all the classical pieces back to back whilst the second disc has the Classical/Rock songs on it. This I feel makes it harder to appreciate what Turunen and Terrana have achieved on 'Beauty & The Beat' because this splitting has given (on the CD) the songs a disjointed feel (even though everything is excellently mixed together) so personally I'd stick with the DVD.

I have to say that as much as I enjoyed watching this DVD, if you're not a fan of Classical Music or theatrical show tunes, then even if you're a fan of what these two artists have done before, this probably isn't for you. If though you want to be a little more adventurous in what you listen to and would like to watch, two "Rock" musicians doing something completely different, then you might enjoy watching these two hours of wonderful music, that have been beautifully filmed in Hi-Def and sung and performed, by some of the best musicians you'll hear. Go on… give it a try.

Ian Johnson

ZZ TOP– 'LIVE AT MONTREUX 2013' *(Eagle Rock)* Genre: Rock

ZZ Top have always been a sentimental favourite due to the fact that they were my first ever live headliners. Their groovy, riff-tastic style always "struck a chord" with me so when the opportunity to catch up with those "Good Ol' Boys From Texas" presented itself, I decided to take it. This DVD showcases the trio's 2013 performance at the 47th Montreux Jazz Festival and unsurprisingly features a set-list of Top classics that spans their entire career.

There's a few truly historic offerings like 'Waitin' For The Bus', 'Jesus Just Left Chicago' ('Tres Hombres'), 'Tube Snake Boogie' ('El Loco') and closer 'Tush' ('Fandango!'). The show also includes a handful from that stratospheric hit album 'Eliminator' such as opener 'Got Me Under Pressure', 'Gimme All Your Lovin" and 'Legs' as well as 'I Gotsta Get Paid', 'Flyin' High' and Chartreuse' from their latest 'La Futura'. The extras include three interviews and a rather well put together historical booklet.

Visually this is a good representation of what the Texas trio are all about and it certainly shows them "doin' their thang". There's the "cheap sunglasses", the hats, the white, fluffy guitars ('Legs'), plenty of dual two-step shuffles/boogieing between Billy Gibbons and Dusty Hill and of course their famous trademark bandy leg move ('Sharp Dressed Man'). The show itself is pretty sparse with only the band and some screens, which is a long way from the light and stage shows I have personally witnessed but understandable given this is a festival appearance.

Thankfully the camera work and editing avoids the present, head-ache inducing trend of schizophrenically flicking from one shot to the next like a Gatlin Gun although some of it is still a little swift occasionally. There's a nice mixture of long range shots that sweep and zoom in and good close ups and mid-range shots. Audibly the soundtrack is excellent with each man's contribution to the proceedings crystal clear. Hill's bass bounces around superbly, Frank Beard's drums are crisp and you can hear every husky vocal and guitar strike from Gibbons.

As much as I enjoyed watching this, there are a couple of negatives for me personally. There is a two song segment in the middle where they are joined by Mike Flanigin (Hammond Organ) and Van Wilks (guitar) in a tribute to festival founder Claude Nobs; not being a Jazz fan, I really didn't enjoy these two and would rather not view them again. In addition, with the exception of the encore and at song ends, the crowd are pretty quiet for the most part which results in a slightly subdued overall atmosphere.

But these gripes are more personal than general and even with them; this is still a quality recording of a great performance. Musically they are on excellent form and appear to be having a cracking time throughout playing the varied set-list. I have thoroughly enjoyed this DVD several times and I can happily recommend it to any fan of this legendary band.

Dave Scott

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SHORT - SHARP - SHOTS OF - ROCK!

Steven Reid takes a look at new EP releases

It's apt to begin this issues' herding together of the great, good and plain old plain, shorter releases with a band called **MICROCUTS**, so let's. Apt the band name may be for SSSOR, but also that they should choose to name themselves after a Muse song, yet 'EP#1' (exactly as on tin and all that) is slightly more down to earth than their inspiration. Thick riffs and straight beats give off a less bombastic (or arsey, and I like Muse…) feel, however with band member names such as Micro, General, Strike and…eh…El Motorrr, running alongside tales of jailbreaks, pubs, world domination and pyromania, there's an air of trying too hard for the sake of trying too hard. If Microcuts had pioneered the sound they hammer out, then they would be destined for great things. They didn't, so 'Snakes & Apples', 'Bar Of The Wrong' and 'Blocks' simply remind of others. However, as an EP it's a steady beginning.

For a bass-vocals/drum-vocals duo **KING CANUTE** are surprisingly unpretentious; an unusually 1980s Electro-feel hustled into a Husker Du panic via grooves the size of, well, big grooves! It's mighty catchy this self-titled release, especially through 'Drive' and its also melodic as hell. I'm not a fan of the wailing wall of noise most drum based duos clatter out (The White Shites anyone?), yet KC may be the Golden Childs of this style!

Showing how hip and trendy they are, 'FACE I LOVE' is also an "app" for the ever evolving **THE DEAD DAISIES**. Featuring members of Guns n' Roses, Whitesnake, Ozzy Osbourne and Noiseworks, the line-up of Jon Stevens, David Lowy, Richard Fortus, Marco Mendoza, Dizzy Reed and Brian Tichy hits the bull's eye with the Aerosmith like 'Your Karma', shakes the foundations with the stomping R 'n'R of 'Angel In Your Eyes' and of course scores the winner with the Bluesy, almost 'Heartbreak Station' era Cinderella of the title track. Add a sparkly cover version of 'Helter Skelter' (I'm not telling you who it was originally by - if you don't know you deserve to be left hanging…) and this, as they say "North of the border", is a belter.

An amalgam of Muse, Queens Of The Stone Age and a surprise twist of Alter Bridge leaves **FIRE RED EMPRESS** (this issue's best band name competition winners!) to 'PAINT ME THE DEVIL' in a memorable, yet intricate wallop of killer riffage, killing vocals and kinda kool rhythms. All their efforts may be only three tracks long, but the trio convince while generally cavorting around your skull with a crush of casually cathartic confidence. 'Left Unspoken' is well worth talking about, while 'Behind The Veil' should be brought into the open. Classy stuff indeed, especially for a first offering, as this is.

Featuring rapper, Xzibit, **WITHIN TEMPTATION** provide three takes on 'WE RUN' alongside an exclusive demo track as their second standalone release from the wonderful 'Hydra' album. Personally it still isn't my favourite moment from the album (me and Rap really never have seen eye to eye), but a radio edit which cuts the controversial "melon-farmer" expletive, is the main event. Disappointingly the "full" version and a pointless dance re-mix add little value. Which leaves the previously unreleased demo cut, 'Living On Fire' as the most interesting, if hardly essential, fare. That said, with the exclusive track in tow, this is still a release that the WT faithful will want to add to their download folder.

GALAHAD are the form band in U.K. Prog right now - and the competition is fierce - something they prove with their 'GUARDIAN ANGEL' EP, the second in a series of several shorter releases due this year from the band. It highlights the 'Beyond The Realms Of Euphoria' album track in four very different guises, from a piano interpretation to a hybrid of the "full" and "reprise" versions (this is how to use dance motifs in a song without losing the essence of what it's all about!), although the uplifting magnificence of the original track shines through in the end to win the compare and contrast competition (think, 'Where's Wally?' without the stripes and bad hat…). A piano version of 'Beyond The Barbed Wire' closes this EP out in scintillating style, leaving one word in the mind. Magnificent.

He may look mean and moody in a "checked shirt from M&S" kinda way but there's no doubting **COLE CHILDERS** can sing. Highlighting his time in the armed forces with the video for 'Save Me', his 'AURORA' EP is varied, although possibly too much so. Linkin Park is in there somewhere, Creed is a touching point, while Shinedown and Black Stone Cherry are also evoked, causing even across only six tracks, a slightly disjointed feel. Childers' melodic-aggressive vocals and his intricate-powerful guitar work does try hard to hold it all together, both ensuring that there isn't a bad song in sight, although a little stylistic focus may well be required for a full length release. If that happens, I'd suggest starting with the excellent closing, acoustic, title track and building from there.

Rocking a cool Faces vibe through their self titled debut effort come **THE RIVER 68'S**, a band recommended to me by one-time and much missed Fireworks scribe Alister Strachan. They create an easy mood through electric piano, with smooth yet forceful vocals driving 'Brandy Alexander', while 'I'm Alive' toughens up the same approach in a manner which completely lives up to its name. Add the Rod Stewart sway of 'Move Up And Shine' and TR68's may be thumping an old tub, but they sure are making a fine racket out of it.

Rough, ready and in your face Rockers, **THE BLACK SPIDERS**, are wasting no time since their acclaimed 'This Savage Land' album, inviting you now to their 'RAT MANSION'. 'Stick It To The Man' kicks in, attitude spitting, riff roaring, yet the underlying melody is what hits hardest. 'Ramones' is a tribute to the band in question and one made only more poignant since the recent death of the last original member of the band, Tommy Ramone (R.I.P.), the song cleverly avoiding pastiche, while still being Punkier than TBS usual output. The older TBS become, the looser and more dangerous they get, yet the swaggering 'Black Heart Blues' and strutting 'Love Me' still have enough Sass 'n' Roll (that's different to sausage rolls…) to draw in those who were seduced by the band's 'Kiss Tried To Kill Me' breakthrough.

If you've got your groove going and you're hitting your stride, then it's a no brainer to call your latest release, 'THE MOJO EP'. So there's no guessing that **BOB MALONE** feels he's at the top of his game. Think a mix of early Status Quo, John Fogerty, Aynsley Lister, Randy Newman and lashings of The Union and the authentic, yet Rocking Blues of 'Certain Distance' or 'Toxic Love' will be no surprise. 'I'm Not Fine' seals the deal through a more up-tempo romp and confirms that if some heavied up Blues is your craving, then Malone has your fix.

Reuniting one-time Troy, Tour De Force and Medicine Hat man Fred A (he also worked in the legendary record store Shades and for Music For Nations - so the cool factor is assured), with some old school chums and a new drummer, **FARENHEIT** (yes, who needs a silent "h" anyway??), surprise by being damn good. More shocking, they're French! The band themselves bandy about such influences as Thin Lizzy, Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, Y&T and Tesla, - and I get where they're coming from - yet 'The Fall', 'Always' and 'Tell Me' all add a slightly more commercial edge which leads us right up the Fireworks musical boulevard. Snazzy guitar runs, cracking vocals and some tightly constructed songs marks 'ORIGINS' out as a short burst with a long memory time. If you're looking to take a punt from this issues selections on an unknown band who range from Sunset Strip to NWOBHM, via some classic 1970s and 1980s Rock of the Melodic variety (actually those Y&T meets Tesla comparisons are beginning to work for me now), then this is it.

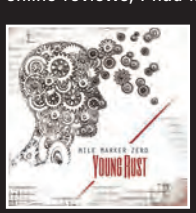
Yes, vocalist Frederik Presley (let's call him Frelvis, shall we?) is singing the line "grab my balls and shout!" in the cunningly titled 'Shout' (better than just grabbing your balls, I suppose…) which should give you an idea of where **SUPERDIRT** and their (non AC/DC approved) 'ROCK N' ROLL TRAIN' is steaming in from. Unexpectedly, Mercyful Fate and King Diamond guitarist Michael Denner fires out the solo on the opening title track, yet it isn't really a clue to the band's sound. Instead Motorhead rattling into 'Electric' era The Cult is closer to the mark. In the end this EP is intentionally rough around the edges, but still damn good fun.

Originally a full length album released in 2000, **ART OF INFINTY** have now split 'EVOLUTION PARTS 1-4' into EPs; this being the first. Sitting somewhere between Prog, Art-Rock and Ambient, I have to say that I've found the results to be quite captivating. Pink Floyd like moments segue masterfully into spoken word sections and atmospheric ambience, while the sometimes vocals of Eva Wolf are simply wonderful. In places the feel of 'Part 3 - Through The Ages' is more sci-fi soundtrack but musical links to Vangelis or Jean Michel Jarre, alongside the stylish vocals, keep it song based enough to work. Amazingly this music is approaching a decade in age but what Thorsten Sudler and Thorsten Rentsch have created sounds more futuristic than it does vintage.

A year on from their first in an ongoing series of EPs, **SKID ROW** returns with the snappily titled 'RISE OF THE DAMNATION - UNITED WORLD REBELLION - CHAPTER 2'. Five new tracks make up the heart of this release, with 'We Are The Damned', 'Give It The Gun', and 'Damnation Army' proving just how hungry this bunch are once more. Two excellent covers, Queen's 'Sheer Heart Attack' and Aerosmith's 'Rats In The Cellar' close things out; vocalist Johnny Solinger is on top form, while guitarists Dave "The Snake" Sabo and Scotti Hill positively tear through these tracks and the originals. With another great EP and another October U.K. tour in the offing, SR are back and the world of Hard Rock is a better place for it.

Back in 2011 Fireworks' very own Duncan Jamieson declared **REASON** to be "a new voice in British Prog and it looks like they're 'Darkest Star' is rising." Moving on from those stars to 'BEYOND THE DARKEST HORIZON', Duncan was bang on the money. 'Synchronized' Rocks, yet it also Progs with Neo-ness, Paul Mace reminding of Galahad's Stu Nicholson. Yet guitarist Chris Gyngell riffs harder and solos with an intensity not often found in this genre. 'Fire Eternal', as it name suggests, brimming with a searing heat, while 'Sacrifice' keeps up the pace. Proving that Prog with Metallic influences isn't all "Prog Metal" and with producer Beau Hill in their corner, Reason are a band who deserve far greater recognition than has come their way so far.

Having stumbled across **MILE MARKER ZERO** while reading through some online reviews, I had my interest severely piqued. Being referred to as Tool, Fates Warning and Muse influenced is an eclectic list, however add Nine Inch Nails or Coheed And Cambria to that mix and you're left with a band focused, heavy, quirky and poised. It's a balancing act with perilous drops on either side, but 'Between The Lines', 'The Great Unknown', or 'Trick Of The Tongue' illustrate how effortlessly this band negotiate the hazards. Fans of all styles of Prog should be checking 'YOUNG RUST' out.



PLAYLISTS

Truly worthy of the name, the latest album from Work Of Art dominates this issue's Writers Chart.

1 Work Of Art 'Framework' *(Frontiers)*

2 Night Ranger 'High Road' *(Frontiers)*

3 Night By Night 'NxN' *(Sun Hill/Cargo)*

Bruce Mee

1. **Ten** – Albion
2. **In Faith** – There's A Storm Coming
3. **Work Of Art** – Framework
4. **Bon Jovi** – New Jersey (Deluxe)

5. **Unisonic** – Light of Dawn

James Gaden

1. **Fozzy** – Do You Wanna Start A War?
2. **Tony Ferrino** – Phenomenon
3. **Bernie Marsden** – Shine
4. **Shaman's Harvest** – Smokin' Hearts & Broken Guns
5. **Vinnie Jones** – Respect

Dave Scott

1. **Richie Sambora** – Stranger In This Town
2. **Crucified Barbara** - In The Red
3. **Blackberry Smoke** – Leave A Scar – Live In North Carolina
4. **Deep Purple** – Live In Graz 1975
5. **Black State Highway** – Black State Highway

Steven Reid

1. **Slash feat. Myles Kennedy And The Conspirators** – World On Fire
2. **The Dowling Poole** – Bleak Strategies
3. **IQ** – The Road Of Bones
4. **Uriah Heep** – Outsider
5. **Tim Bowness** – Abandoned Dancehall Dreams

Ant Heeks

1. **Bon Jovi** – New Jersey (Deluxe)
2. **Blackberry Smoke** – Leave A Scar – Live In North Carolina
3. **Mike Tramp** – Museum
4. **Adrenaline Rush** – Adrenaline Rush
5. **X-Drive** – Get Your Rock On

Rob McKenzie

1. **Southside Johnny & The Asbury Jukes** - Men Without Women Live
2. **Ozzy Osbourne** – The Essential
3. **Grave Digger** – Return Of The Reaper
4. **Taz Taylor Band** – Deja Voodoo
5. **Night By Night** – NxN

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

1. **These Raven Skies** – These Raven Skies
2. **Cage The Gods** – Badlands
3. **S.U.N.** – Something Unto Nothing
4. **Timo Tolkki's Avalon** – Angels Of The Apocalypse
5. **Berggren Kerslake Band** – The Sun Has Gone Hazy

Ian Johnson

1. **Anathema** – Distant Satellites
2. **Threshold** – For The Journey
3. **State Of Salazar** – All The Way
4. **Robert Reed** – Sanctuary
5. **Night By Night** – NxN

Mónica Castedo-López

1. **The Quireboys** – Black Eyed Sons
2. **Night By Night** – N x N
3. **Skid Row** – Rise of the Damnation Army
4. **Unisonic** – Light of Dawn
5. **Ace Frehley** – Space Invader

Carl Buxton

1. **Patrizia** – Rock The Throne
2. **Accept** – Blind Rage
3. **Tarja** – Left In The Dark
4. **Cosmo** – Alien
5. **Work Of Art** – Framework

Dave Bott

1. **Edguy** – Space Police, Defenders of the Crown
2. **Judas Priest** – Metalogy
3. **Space Elevator** – Space Elevator
4. **Etta Zero** – Last of All Sunsets
5. **Mostly Autumn** – Dressed In Voices

Steve Swift

1. **Work Of Art** – Framework
2. **Syd Arthur** – Sound Mirror
3. **Philip Sayce** – Influence
4. **Leogun** – By The Reins
5. **Bonham** – Mad Hatter

Brent Rusche

1. **Work Of Art** – Framework
2. **State of Salazar** – All The Way
3. **Hard Riot** – The Blackened Heart
4. **Night Ranger** – High Road
5. **Kalidia** – Lies' Device

Az Chaudhry

1. **Yes** – Heaven and Earth
2. **Seven** – Seven
3. **Night Ranger** – High Road
4. **Saga** – Sagacity
5. **Toto** – Live in Poland

Duncan Jamieson

1. **Night Ranger** – High Road
2. **Chicago** – Now
3. **Tesla** – Simplicity
4. **Gregory Lynn Hall** – Heaven To Earth
5. **Uriah Heep** – Outsider

Mike Newdeck

1. **Burn The Rez** – Burn The Rez
2. **Highway Saints** – Highway Saints
3. **Temple Agents** – Find The Place
4. **Anberlin** – Lowborn
5. **Seether** – Isolate & Medicate

Dave Cockett

1. **Judas Priest** – Redeemer Of Souls
2. **Led Zeppelin** – Led Zeppelin II
3. **Saga** – Sagacity
4. **WAMI** – Kill The King
5. **Martyr De Mona** – Impera

Dan Bond

1. **Extreme** - Extreme
2. **Fallen Angel** - Crawling Out Of Hell
3. **Crucified Barbara** - The Midnight Chase
4. **Exodus** - Shovel Headed Kill Machine
5. **King Diamond** - Abigail

Alexandra Mrozowska

1. **AOR** – LA Connection

2. **Kruk** – Before
3. **Scream Maker** – Livin' In The Past
4. **Existance** – Steel Alive
5. **Black Trip** – Goin' Under

Mark Donnelly

1. **Miss Behaviour** – Double Agent
2. **The Intelligent Music Project II** – My Kind O' Lovin'
3. **Loud Lion** – Die Tough
4. **False Coda** – Closer To The Edge
5. **Johnny & The Rest** – Wolves In The Night

Ian Parry

1. **Diesel** – Into The Fire

2. **Download** – Eleven Stages
3. **Montrose** – At the Record Plant 1973
4. **Harmonic Generator** – When The Sun Goes Down
5. **Tesla** – Simplicity

Michael Anthony

1. **Rival Sons** – Great Western Valkyrie
2. **Anathema** – Distant Satellites
3. **Epica** – The Quantum Enigma
4. **IQ** – The Road of Bones
5. **The Fierce And The Dead** – Spooky Action

Franco Cerchiari

1. **Opeth** – The Candlelit Year
2. **Words Of Farewell** – The Black Wild Yonder
3. **Mastadon** – Once More Around The Sun
4. **Lord Of The Lost** – From The Flame Into The Fire
5. **Twilight Force** – Tales Of Ancient Prophecies

Dave Crompton

1. **Chris Braide** – Fifty Dollar Planets And Twenty Cent Stars
2. **A.C.T.** – Circus Pandemonium
3. **Mother Road** – Drive
4. **Seven** – Seven

5. **Rage Of Angels** – Dreamworld

Helen Bradley Owers

1. **Laney's Legion** – Laney's Legion
2. **The Graveltones** – Don't Wait Down
3. **Stevie Salas** – Electric Pow Wow
4. **Richie Kotzen** – Peace Sign
5. **Trucker Diablo** – Songs of Iron

Paul Woodward

1. **Moonland** – Moonland
2. **Night By Night** – NxN
3. **Adrenaline Rush** – Adrenaline Rush
4. **7HY** – No Place In Heaven
5. **Helix** – Bastard Of The Blues

Alan Holloway

1. **Work Of Art** – Framework
2. **Striker** – City Of Gold
3. **A Road To Damascus** – Retrospect
4. **Karl Johnson** – New Beginning
5. **Niva** – Incremental IV

Mick Burgess

1. **Roxie 77** – Ameriswede
2. **Judas Priest** – Redeemer of Souls
3. **Crystal Eyes** – Killer
4. **Rival Sons** – Great Western Valkyrie
5. **Manitoba's Wild Kingdom** – And You?

Ray Paul

1. **Blues Pills** – Blues Pills
2. **Ace Frehley** – Space Invader
3. **Rival Sons** – Great Western Valkyrie
4. **Rainbows Are Free** – Waves Ahead Of The Ocean
5. **Night Ranger** – High Road

BOOKMARK

Rob McKenzie provides an overview of essential reading for music lovers everywhere

This issue of Bookmark contains reviews on an eclectic set of books. Within, an interesting genre is covered - namely a graphic novel retelling the story of Metallica; it works well and I expect more of this style to follow. Please read on about this plus four more conventional but equally rewarding music related books.

'METALLICA, NOTHING ELSE MATTERS' JIM MCCARTHY/BRIAN WILLIAMSON *(Omnibus Press)*

This book could be the shape of things to come in this ever increasingly visual and busy world. 'Metallica, Nothing Else Matters' is a graphic novel retelling the story of this classic band full of ground-breaking events. Drawn by acclaimed artist Brian Williamson and told using first person dialogue boxes by Jim McCarthy, the story of Metallica is brought to life and I have to say it works well. It did need careful handling and so the drawings are in a mature and dark "manga" style befitting a "graphic novel" as opposed to being merely a comic.

Key events in the life of the band are told and are purposefully stitched together with sparse intervening details. This is, as mentioned, a graphic novel as opposed to a biography so artistic licence is granted to just dwell on the key and instrumental bits (e.g. David Mustaine's departure and the flashbacks to James Hetfield's youth as opposed to more mundane minutiae).

The thought processes of the band members are relayed in the first person; these appear sometimes to be well researched assumptions as opposed to direct quotes. This style works well in explaining the band members' launch into stardom and their varying capacities to adjust.

The pivotal tale is told of Lars Ulrich, ostensibly the most business minded of the band and his high profile role of stopping Napster and strongly defending Metallica's position. The venture to San Quentin prison and the recording of the 'St. Anger' album is also relayed with the band pictured on the front foot in terms of justifying this album and all others for that matter (including the 'Lulu' album with Lou Reed).

Well drawn, with the essence of the story memorably portrayed, this is an enjoyable read. With a similar book by the pair about Kurt Cobain already available, I am sure there will be more to come.

Paperback, 160 pages, 8.8" x 6.5", b&w line drawings throughout.
Details at www.omnibuspress.com

'RESCUED FROM REALITY, THE LIFE AND TIMES OF WALTER TROUT' HENRY YATES & WALTER TROUT *(MLG Publishing)*

Walter Trout is a well-respected Blues guitarist who, before venturing on an acclaimed solo career, was in Canned Heat and John Mayall's Bluesbreakers. Put like that, this book sounds marginally interesting; however the journey Trout took and the honesty in which he talks about his life makes this book truly fascinating.

Written by Henry Yates as a transcript of many hours of interviews with Trout, the story stretches from a far from idyllic childhood in Ocean City, New Jersey (yes, Trout is part of the auspicious N.J. alumni) to the present day. The present day consists of the launch of a new album, 'The Blues Came Callin'' and a debilitating liver condition and subsequent transplant which has resulted in a dramatic weight loss with Trout now almost unrecognisable.

Sandwiched in between this A4 sized book are astounding high quality colour photos of the man in action; unquestionably one of the Blues Rock greats. In terms of key stories in the book, Trout moving away from drugs and drink is told earnestly but his marriage to Marie Brændgaard takes primacy. They have three children and she also became his manager and turned his life around financially. As a result since the mid 1990s, Trout has been in charge of his own destiny and can chose producers and recording locations, becoming such a force in the Blues Rock world.

There are no discographies or tour lists included, it is not that type of book; the story of Trout is told via Yates in a high level way dipping into specific detail as appropriate. However, there is certainly enough for the reader to discover the true essence of Trout's story and its lows and highs. It is clear that Trout is very supportive of young musicians making their way through the ranks - probably due to his mixed experience with his brushes with heroes (for example Duke Ellington being inspirational, whereas some notable others were much less impressive).

Hopefully there is much more to come of Walter Trout; the current news (just post the end of this book) is that Trout has had a liver transplant but there are complications and the operation was just one important step on his road to recovery.

Paperback, 128 pages, 10.5" x 8", colour and b&w photos throughout.
Details at www.mascotlabelgroup.com

'THE WHO FAQ' – MIKE SEGRETTO *(Backbeat Books)*

Subtitled, 'All That's Left To Know About Fifty Years Of Maximum R&B', this new addition to the FAQ series covers one of the biggest U.K. bands ever - The Who. The Who FAQ covers a lot of ground, generally chronologically but then focussing on areas of interest. The famous band members – Pete Townshend, Roger Daltrey, John Entwistle and Keith Moon – roll off the tongue almost as quickly as their Liverpudlian counterparts and their individual stories are told of them as complex people and also talented musicians.

The controversy surrounding Townshend in 2003 regarding his internet use is told in a very non-judgemental way and just points out the facts; the author leaves it up to the reader what to make of the story.

Surprisingly, their triumphant concert kicking off the closing of the Olympic Games in London 2012 is only briefly mentioned; surely one of the highs even for a giant band like TW?

Praised as one of the creators of the Rock Opera, Townshend's forays ('Quadrophenia', 'Tommy' etc.) are covered extensively, as are their live albums ('Live At Leeds' being considered one of the best live albums ever).

Entwistle, Townshend and Daltrey's solo output is also summarised and appraised. Interestingly, the book cites Daltrey's 'McVicar' (in large part written by Russ Ballard and Billy Nicholls) as a key solo album and top of his fans' list of favourite albums.

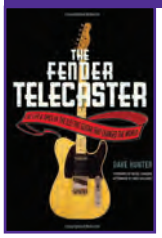
Latter members of TW are included as the book covers activities up to the present day where sadly only two of the original band are still alive. However, although Zak Starkey and Kenney Jones are given their due, the overriding feel of the book is that the most famous line-up is where the magic was. Not only music is mentioned; religion and politics are covered with the same intensity and enthusiasm as the band's musical exploits.

The impact of TW is a key theme; indeed, the foreword is written by Dave Davies of The Kinks and tells of their rivalry. Later and themselves highly influential bands such as the The Damned, The Jam, The Clash and even the Sex Pistols are detailed as loving and respecting TW.

Even if you are a huge The Who fan, there still must be something in this book you didn´t know.

Paperback, 371 pages, 9" x 6", some b&w photos.
Details at www.backbeatbooks.com

'THE FENDER TELECASTER, THE LIFE & TIMES OF THE ELECTRIC GUITAR THAT CHANGED THE WORLD' – DAVE HUNTER *(Voyageur Press)*



The Telecaster is known as the people's guitar - less expensive and less fancy than guitars like the Stratocaster. Dave Hunter's 'The Fender Telecaster' tells and illustrates the iconic guitar's story and equally importantly focusses on the guitarists well known for playing it.

The book though starts a bit earlier and provides a detailed life history of a certain Leo Fender who would one day lend his name to at least two of the most famous guitars in the world. Focussing on producing a solid body guitar post-War, Fender developed the Esquire which looks very similar to the Telecaster. The book later reveals that it is an Esquire (not a Telecaster) that Bruce Springsteen has on the 'Born To Run' cover. One similar-ish model led to another (the Esquire, then the Broadcaster with two pickups, then the Nocaster) before the Telecaster was produced in 1951. The Tele part was a reference to television which of course was a big newish thing back then!

Interspersed with the technical detail of the genesis of the guitar are resumes on Telecaster players of the 1950s and 1960s; notably James Burton (Elvis Presley) and Muddy Waters. Page after high quality page of colour photos of the guitar are included, some with the puzzling "ashtray" tailpiece guard which Wilko Johnson mentions in the foreword as one of the most unused guitar parts in history.

The illustrations contained throughout the book of the Tele demonstrate very well that its simplicity is in fact its beauty. The no-frills look undoubtedly appealed to the sensibilities of Springsteen and Joe Strummer. Its robustness and tone quality appealed to the British Blues guitarists of the 1960s with Jeff Beck describing the Tele as "that old piece of fantastic equipment". Indeed, it was likely that Eric Clapton played a Tele on 'Strange Brew'. Other guitar geniuses of the time were also linked to the guitar such as Syd Barrett and Jimmy Page who played a Tele on the solo to 'Stairway To Heaven' and not a Gibson Les Paul that he was more known for playing.

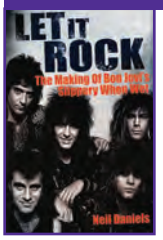
The book, as would be expected, includes a section on Keith Richards (perhaps the most famous Tele player). His preference for open-G tuning with the low string removed (as "it gets in the way") is definitively told.

Once the 1970s are out of the way, the coverage of famous Country guitarists favouring the Tele increases and it is nice to see Metal covered in recent years by John 5. A genius Country-style picker, he is of course more famous for being the guitar gunslinger for Marilyn Mason and now Rob Zombie. He has his own John 5 Signature Telecaster which has a lot of chrome and a Bigsby vibrato tailpiece but still has the classic Tele shape.

This book is a must for owners and/or lovers of the Telecaster and its players.

Hardback, 240 pages, 11" x 9.5", colour and b&w photos throughout.
Details at www.qbookshopuk.co.uk

'LET IT ROCK: THE MAKING OF BON JOVI'S SLIPPERY WHEN WET' NEIL DANIELS *(Soundcheck Books)*



Following his Bon Jovi Encyclopaedia in 2009, Neil Daniels has focused on the most successful period of this very successful band; namely the breakthrough 'Slippery When Wet' album.

Written in an easy to read format, the early history of the band is told with the ingredients coming into place for their big third album; those ingredients being the onboarding of co-writer Desmond Child (on the suggestion of Paul Stanley) and producer Bruce Fairbairn, plus the learnings from the first two albums.

The book's glorification of the album is justified and I would agree (in my view the only real filler is 'Social Disease'). 'Never Say Goodbye' is on the cusp of magnificent and slushy but the book goes for the former (the guitar solo is great anyway). The story of the band going from supporting band to literally the biggest band in the world is quite telling with a reference to the band leaving a tour headlined by .38 Special midway.

Daniels includes views from other journalists which are, as you would expect, very complimentary - apart from Jeb Wright who on the whole maligns the band for introducing Hairspray Rock to the masses; he does concede some positive attributes as well though. As for me during that period, I was there at the 1987 Monsters Of Rock festival in the rain and BJ's (the headliner) was the best gig I have witnessed to this day. So impressive were the band, that I could barely remember that Metallica were on the bill. Okay, the sound was up for BJ and there were fireworks etc. (and the infamous helicopter buzzing, that's right during Metallica's slot!), but they were extra special that night.

None of the band members were involved in the book so their quotes are second hand, but there is an afterword from Derek Shulman who signed the band to PolyGram. Also, the book does not dwell exclusively on Jon Bon Jovi; Richie Sambora and David Bryan are given their due as well.

The book finishes off with a whistle stop history of the band to the present day; it describes the band as surviving and generally thriving by adapting to market conditions. So, dabbles with Grunge (sort of in 'Keep The Faith') and Country Music (definitely in 'Lost Highway') are seen as justifiable and worthy.

As with all Daniels' books, there is a detailed discography; very comprehensive in this case with album, single, video listing for the whole of Bon Jovi's history as well as listings of the solo ventures from JBJ, Sambora and Bryan. One for a holiday read.

Paperback,160 pages, 9.5" x 6.7", colour and b&w photos throughout.
Details at www.soundcheckbooks.co.uk

Solo debut from the US singer (ex- 101 SOUTH) serving a superb mixture of classic hard rock in the vein of DIO / RAINBOW and radio friendly AOR tunes. Feat. Craig Goldy & Billy Liesegang.

A massive double melodic rock strike from Sweden !

ALBUM OUT: 29.08.2014

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Sweden Rock Festival

SOLVESBORG, SWEDEN – 4th - 7th JUNE 2014

Wednesday 4th

Okay folks, if you've read my previous reviews of Europe's best open air festival then you'll know the travel details by now. Manchester to Copenhagen by air, then hire car to Kristianstad (which didn't break down this year!) and stroll around the town for the rest of Tuesday and Wednesday morning. Along with our usual companions and fellow Firefest crew members Sarah and Keith, we also had TSO/Inglorious singer Nathan James along for the ride this year. We arrived at the distant outpost of car park #2, completed the twenty minute walk and picked up our passes just in time for the start of **Freak Kitchen** on the Sweden Stage.

As usual just the three smallest stages were open on the warm-up day; Matthias IA Eklundh's uber-talented trio wrapped their considerable chops around light-hearted slabs of whimsy like 'Porno Daddy', 'God Save The Spleen' and 'Teargas Jazz'. As musicians they should be much better known worldwide, but sticking to their own peculiar musical vision has probably put an end to that. Most of the rest of the afternoon was spent looking around the festival, and finding not much of interest in the Dust Bowl Jokies, Crowbar and Black Trip as it was a good few hours to wait for **Magnum**. They mixed tracks from the latest album 'Escape From The Shadow Garden' and their previous two releases, with classics from their heyday; the band are a no-brainer for a festival like this. Bob Catley struggled a little at the end of a long tour but the crowd chipped in with their own vocals on the likes of 'Vigilante', 'All England's Eyes' and 'The Spirit' to get Sweden Rock 2015 underway in earnest.

A joint set billed as **Paul Di'Anno vs. Blaze Bayley** had the latter as the easy winner, but despite the former having all the best songs, it didn't help that he was unable to stand for much of the set and sang while sitting on the drum riser. A midnight appointment with **Queensryche** was the perfect end to the first day. This was my fifth sighting of the band with new singer Todd LaTorre and they just get better each time, ripping through a great twenty song set-list that included three from the latest album and three from the debut EP, including opener 'Nightrider' and the welcome return of 'The Lady Wore Black'. LaTorre has grown in confidence over the last eighteen months and the rest of the band looked happy and relaxed, cementing a killer show with an ending of 'Eyes Of A Stranger' and 'Empire', and an amazing encore of 'Queen Of The Reich', 'Jet City Woman' and 'Take Hold Of The Flame'.

Thursday 5th

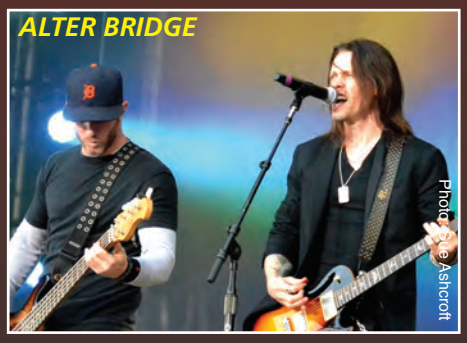
On the first full day, Jake E. Lee and his **Red Dragon Cartel** drew the short straw of opening the Rock Stage at noon, and they probably wished they hadn't bothered. Ozzy Osbourne's 'The Ultimate Sin' got the crowd on their side from the start and 'Deceived' was a great original, but no less than four times the guitar cut out at key moments, completely ruining the Badlands section of the set, and if it weren't for the guitarist's good humour and singer Darren Smith's

easy stage manner, they could easily have walked off and not come back. "I guess we're the guinea pigs for this stage" quipped Smith before the fault was finally fixed by changing a lead. The cheers that greeted the end of 'Bark At The Moon' came from the sympathy vote as much as anything else. Cancellations had led to **Pretty Maids** being the first band on the Festival Stage, and as usual they were in great form and kicked off with 'Mother Of All Lies' and they trotted out 'Red Hot And Heavy' early in the set. Ronnie Atkins is a great front-man with a unique, gravelly voice and Ken Hammer is the riffmeister, and with great songs like 'My Soul To Take' and 'Little Drops Of Heaven', it seems like they can't fail as a festival band. I'm kinda sick of hearing 'Future World' so I wandered off for a look around, stopping at the 4Sound Stage to catch a bit of **Cloven Hoof**, who actually sounded pretty good despite consisting of just original bassist Lee Payne and some young lads who looked fresh out of college.

An annoying clash between **Robin Beck** and **Transatlantic** inevitably led me to the Rock Stage where the Prog "super-group" I'd missed on their recent London show had a much shorter set than their usual three and a half hour marathons. It was a unique show for them too, performing for the first and only time as a six piece as Mike Portnoy, Neal Morse, Pete Trewavas and Roine Stolt were joined not only by Spock's Beard/Enchant front-man Ted Leonard on second guitar, but also by the man he replaced for the tour, usual guitarist and keyboard player Daniel Gildenlow. The Pain Of Salvation mastermind had been forced to pull out of the tour after contracting a life-threatening illness, so it was great to see him back to his normal self and doing double duty with his main band. Morse led the band through an epic from each of their four albums with 'Into The Blue', excerpts from 'The Whirlwind', 'All Of The Above' and the half-hour encore 'Stranger In Your Soul'. The band performed superbly and managed to build up a great rapport with the crowd for a non-festival band, however the good vibes that emanated across the stage didn't seem to stretch as far as Portnoy, who was getting increasingly annoyed at his tech's inability to swivel the mic in front of him at the right time. Surely it would be easier to use a headset if you could put it somewhere it wouldn't have interfered with his constant spitting?

One band I really don't get is **Black Stone Cherry**, who are admittedly entertaining to watch and made a great first album, but for me their material has gone downhill since then. I stuck around through most of their set and really enjoyed opener 'Maybe Someday', 'Rain Wizard' and 'Hell & High Water' from that debut album, but as their inferior cover of Joe Walsh's 'Rocky Mountain Way' turned into a drum solo, I wandered away to catch a bit of the entertaining and surprisingly melodic **Turisas**, coming back to BSC in time to catch the last half of the brilliant 'Lonely Train'. Another ideal festival band are **Tesla**, who although they've fallen into a bit of a rut set-list-wise, still have enough great songs to fill an enjoyable ninety minutes. Opening with the unexpected 'I Wanna Live', the first half also included the classics 'Hang Tough', 'Heaven's Trail' and the underrated 'Into The Now', but after 'MP3' (from the latest album), the set got into the ploddy acoustic and Bluesy tracks before 'Getting Better' and 'Modern Day Cowboy' created the demand for the encore of 'Little Suzi' and 'Cumin' Atcha Live'.

For my comments about BSC, see also **Alter Bridge**, whose first album was a killer that they haven't really lived up to. They have a truly great singer and a great guitarist for sure, and are enjoyable enough at their own shows, but at a festival a procession of mid-paced songs all ran into one at a time of the day when bands need to kick it up to get the flagging crowd interested. I wandered off to see the latest line-up of **Masterplan**, who despite having replaced Jorn Lande with a mighty fine singer in Rick Altzi (who from this distance looks like Bill Bailey), gave the impression that they hadn't really rehearsed a show, just a collection of songs with an awkward silence between each, and no connection with the crowd.



The next annoying clash was between **Rob Zombie** and **Uriah Heep**, not that there would be any competition between the two on my iPod or home stereo, but live Zombie is a human dynamo and probably the last true larger-than-life "Rock Star" of our lifetime. His all-action show and killer live band (including guitarist John 5) was a spectacle that everyone should see at least once, so my time was divided between Zombie and one of the first bands I ever got into and saw live. UH are in pretty good shape these days, having successfully filled the void left by the untimely death of the great Trevor Bolder with the distinctly different vibe of our friend Dave Rimmer, and have released their best album in aeons. Never afraid to play new material, the band slipped a large chunk of 'Outsider' in amongst 'Stealin'', 'July Morning', 'Gypsy' et al. Mick Box looked happy and relaxed, Bernie Shaw sang superbly and Russell Gilbrook bashed his kit into submission, so all in all it was classic Heep. Back over on the Rock Stage, Zombie was finishing his set with a tribute to one of his heroes, his cover of Alice Cooper's 'School's Out' seemed a bit naughty with Cooper himself headlining next.

Every few years, **Alice Cooper** has a re-jig, mixing up band members and set-lists, although with so many classics in his arsenal, a large portion of the set must pick itself. This time out not only does he have Tommy Hendriksen and the sultry Orianthi on guitars, but also the return of local Swedish hero Ryan Roxie. There are a few new theatrical bits and the return of songs like 'House Of Pain' and 'He's Back (The Man Behind The Mask)', as well as a covers section in tribute to Rockers we've lost, Cooper danced around their tombstones to the tunes of 'Break On Through (To The Other Side)' (Jim Morrison), 'Revolution' (John Lennon), 'Foxy Lady' (Jimi Hendrix) and 'My Generation' (Keith Moon & John Entwistle). The sole encore of 'School's Out' brings out Zombie and John 5, with Cooper and Zombie threatening each other with swords out on the extended walkway. It was the best Cooper set I've seen for many years and a fitting end to day two.

Friday 6th

There was a ridiculously early start today as legendary Aussie rockers **Kings Of The Sun** were due to kick off at 11.30 am. With just founding drummer Clifford Hoad left from their recording days, he also now handles lead vocals comfortably behind a new band whose guitarist had gone on a bender since arriving in Sweden and had been missing for three days when he should have been rehearsing. However, you'd never notice and songs like 'Vampire' and 'Serpentine' sound pretty-much how they should, the entertaining and slightly eccentric Hoad came across as a real character. It's been a while coming

but **Talisman** finally got to do their Marcel Jacob tribute show with Evergrey/ex-Therion bassist Johan Niemann alongside vocalist Jeff Scott Soto, guitarist Pontus Norgren and drummer Jamie Borger. With a set-list that was heavily weighted towards their amazing debut album, the twelve songs showcased the band perfectly, from the opening riff of 'Break Your Chains', the funky 'Colour My XTC' and frenetic classics like 'Mysterious (This Time It's Serious)', 'Tears In The Sky' and the ultra-infectious 'I'll Be Waiting'. Soto's voice was a little below par but it was still a great reminder of a man and band who should have been much bigger than they were.

The first clash of the day was **Joe Bonamassa** and reformed cult-Seattle Rockers **Q5**, who are probably more famous for housing locking tremolo guru Floyd Rose than for their music. Rose isn't involved in this reunion but the rest of the band were here, and despite early sound problems they impressed with their tightness and heavier versions of 'Missing In Action', 'Pull The Trigger', 'Lonely Lady', Let Go' and an incredible 'When The Mirror Cracks'. Most of the debut album was aired along with several songs from the spin-off band Nightshade. Rick Pierce proved to be a very good guitar player and Jonathan K still has the pipes, but I've no idea why bassist Evan Sheeley was wearing a fake Mohawk. There's a bit of fun that happens every year where some of the Swedish musicians play covers on the smallest stage under the name of **Rockklassiker All Stars**, so this year the likes of Europe's Ian Haugland and Mic Michaeli, Motorhead's Mickey Dee and Hammerfall's Pontus Norgren backed a series of guest singers, so after Soto had done a spot he invited our fellow traveler Nathan James up to share vocals on Queen's 'Tie Your Mother Down'; everyone returned at the end for 'Rocking All Over The World'.

Another long-awaited reunion was Tony Harnell's return to **TNT**, and with much less reliance on backing tracks and two female backing vocalists, their set here was one of the highlights of the weekend. Celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the 'Intuition' album, the likes of 'Caught Between The Tigers', 'Forever Shine On', 'Tonight I'm Falling', 'End Of The Line' and the title track were all dispatched in excellent fashion, along with several from 'Tell No Tales' and a trio from their last great album 'My Religion'. Harnell was in excellent form and revelled in being back on stage with Ronnie LeTekro, Diesel Dahl, Victor Borge and new keyboard player Roger Gilton, eliciting a great response every time he came to the front of the stage and he delivered note perfect vocals throughout.

There's a bit of a buzz around for Retro-Rockers **Blues Pills**, who do what they do very well and have enough uniqueness about them to hopefully avoid the black hole that seems to have swallowed up Saint Jude, whilst the downwardly mobile **Kamelot** were back on the biggest stage and put on the best show I've seen them play since Tommy Karevik came in to replace Roy Khan. Their show was complete with huge flame pots and Arch Enemy's Alissa White-Gluz on guest vocals. There was still a huge chunk of 'The Black Halo' in the set and Karevik has clearly grown into his role as their front-man. Seeing **W.A.S.P.** these days is a bittersweet experience, whilst I still love the band's early material and I'm glad they're still out there doing it, Blackie Lawless doesn't look well, doesn't play some of the songs that go against his recent conversion to Christianity (so no 'Animal (Fuck Like A Beast!), and worst of all relies too heavily on backing tracks to fill out the sound, including obvious double-tracked vocals. The rest of the band made up for his lack of movement and it was a good set-list, but also one of the worst sound mixes of the Festival.

Having missed all **Black Sabbath**'s reunion shows in the U.K. last year due to scheduling conflicts, I was happy when they were announced here. Taking into account the mixed reports I'd heard from the previous leg of the tour, this must have been one of their better shows, with Osbourne in decent form. He was reading some of the lyrics from an autocue but his timing was spot-on, which isn't as easy as it seems on songs like 'Fairies Wear Boots', 'War Pigs' and 'Black Sabbath'. There were a couple of surprises but the set was generally as expected with 'N.I.B' and 'Children Of The Grave' as other highlights. The only thing I didn't really like was Tommy Clufetos' bombastic drumming style as it lacks Bill Ward's feel, especially on the slower songs. Still, Tony Iommi and Geezer Butler made one hell of a sound together and the nostalgia factor was tremendous and not lost on Sweden's knowledgeable music fans. It was a bit naughty when they started the encore of 'Paranoid' with the intro to 'Sabbath Bloody Sabbath' though; talk about deflated when their biggest hit kicked in.

Unusually the headliners weren't the last band on the day, that thankless task fell to Swedish grandiose Symphonic Metallers **Therion** as thousands of BS fans filed past them on the Sweden Stage and out of the exits. Not surprisingly band leader Christofer Johnsson has seen the folly of touring a sixteen-piece band and now has string sections and choirs on backing tracks, with much travelled Rock vocalist Thomas Vikstrom joined by an unnamed opera singer; the excellent Lori Lewis also made her full debut here at short notice. Former Treat bassist Nalle Pahlsson provided surprisingly strong lead vocals as well so there are quite a few options open for performing their complex Rock Operas, which they did with great gusto in a shortened set that ended with Johnsson returning to his Death Metal roots for 'To Mega Therion'.

Saturday 7th June

With the usual second wind that always comes on day four, the excellent weather continued as the reformed **Madam X** delivered an enjoyable set just after noon. The Detroit-based Glam band that features Vixen drummer Roxy Petrucci and her guitarist sister Maxine, along with the other founder members Bret Kaiser and Chris 'Godzilla' Doliber on vocals and bass respectively, have all obviously kept their chops up and sounded pretty much as they did back in 1984 when their 'We Reserve The Right' record was released. 'Dirty Girls', 'Cat's Got Your Tongue' and 'Metal In My Veins' sounded as catchy and naïve as they always did and the band went on to play almost all of their debut album, and with the set unnecessarily fleshed out with the instrument players doing solos (Doliver's consisted mostly of hitting himself over the head with his bass!), it was left to the classic 'High In High School' to bring things to a triumphant close.

As usual the last day turns out to be the busiest one, **Danger Danger**'s killer set on the main stage being amongst the best I've seen them play, Rob Marcello shredded for his home crowd, Bruno Ravel smiled in the sunshine, Steve West thankfully didn't have the problems he'd had in Milan a month earlier, and Ted Poley won over a less than partisan crowd with his sheer exuberance and a walkabout through the audience that caused a bit of commotion. It was great to hear 'Boys Will Be Boys' in the set, along with 'I Still Think About You', but the big guns 'Bang, Bang', 'Naughty, Naughty' and 'Monkey Business' still can't fail to get a response. I immediately rush over to the 4Sound Stage to see the end of a set by **The Rods** and was both thrilled to see the original line-up churn out 'Nothing Going On In The City', 'Crank It Up' and 'Power Lover' and an encore of 'I Live For Rock 'N' Roll', and disappointed that they'd clashed with D2 as they were both obviously firing on all cylinders.

On a day rife with such clashes I opted to see Swedish Prog Metallers **Pain Of Salvation** over **Y&T**, simply because I haven't seen Daniel Gildenlow's mob for several years and haven't seen Y&T for several weeks. After spending four months in hospital with an appalling flesh-eating bug, the details of which I wish I hadn't asked about, Gildenlow and his latest line-up were as sonically perfect and as meticulously musical as ever, even if his fellow guitarist looks like a 1977 Michael Schenker with his blond curly locks, fringed jacket and Flying V. They played excerpts from various albums; the highlights were 'Diffidentia', 'People Passing By' and 'Chain Sling'. Similarly (and with apologies to my Reviews Editor) a choice between **Within Temptation** and seeing Michael Sadler back in his rightful place fronting **Saga** will always favour the Canadians. A truly great and lengthy set was even better than I could have hoped for, guitarist Ian Crichton looked slimmer and played better than in recent years, drummer Mike Thorne added his backing vocals to give the band another dimension, bassist Jim Crichton switched between bass and keyboards, and keyboard player Jim Gilmour caressed the keys with his spidery fingers. Sadler looked pleased to be back and led the crowd who responded loudly; his voice was unique and he added additional keyboards and bass when needed. Opener 'Don't Be Late', the rarely played 'Compromise' and the frenetic 'The Pitchman' were amongst an eighteen song set that was one of the best I've ever seen the band play.

Also excellent was **Billy Idol** who, despite the loss of both Brian Tichy and Derek Sherinian from his band, has filled the roles with other supremely talented musicians. Guitarist Steve Stevens is a legend and it's always fun to hear him plagiarize his own work with the Atomic Playboys and Vince Neil during his incredible solos. The hits were all there but so were a fair share of upbeat album tracks and old Generation X songs. Idol may not be blessed with a golden voice but he has the kind of charisma that you just can't buy. **Ted Nugent** sounded pretty good with the great Derek St. Holmes back on vocals, but a combination of wanting to say goodbye to many friends and Nugent's latest craze for posting pictures of rare big cats that he's killed, have pretty much extinguished any lingering enthusiasm I had for the man and his music. I know it shouldn't make a difference but it does, so I look forward to seeing Derek St. Holmes on next year's Monsters Of Rock Cruise with Howie Simon on guitar, where I can enjoy the classic 'Stranglehold' with impunity.

In the last couple of hours of the festival it's interesting to see how big **Volbeat** have become in their home country. A few years ago they played on the Rock Stage in the middle of the day, and now they're bringing their mix of Metallica riffs and Elvis Presley vocals to headline the Festival Stage backed by several million watts of lighting, pyrotechnics and a firework display that shot rockets high into the night sky. The band were super-tight and have certainly worked hard for their success, the powerful juggernaut of a sound bringing Sweden Rock Festival 2014 to a close…. well, except for the distant sound of Arch Enemy who are still playing on the Sweden Stage.

Despite the long walk back to the car on tired feet, SRF continues to be my favourite European festival. The Swedes sure know how to put on a varied and interesting show and also how to treat people, I doubt such a positive experience could happen anywhere else in the world.

Phil Ashcroft

DOWNLOAD

Donnington Park, 13th – 15th July 2014

Once again, I blinked and a year had passed. It only seemed like a few weeks ago that we were at Download, but here it was again. The main stage had been re-named The Stephen Sutton Stage, in honour of the teenage cancer sufferer who sadly lost his battle against the disease just one month earlier. And looking at the list of bands this year, there was a strong flavour of 2011, with a few of the major bands from that year turning up again. I also noticed an acute absence of Classic British Rock bands, the whole affair looking to have a "younger band" vibe this time around. This usually means that the music will be generally unintelligible, having a million drum beats per second and lyrics being sung by somebody devoid of vocal chords. However, there were a few bands I had listened too with the weekend generally split between absolute must sees, those I will try hard to get to and those I will do if I get chance. And who knew what the weather was going to bring?

Friday 13th

Not the best date to start a festival (and the World Cup had started last night as well), so the odds were stacked against it from the start really, but the weather appeared okay, so in we went, without wellies.

First band on the hit list was **Tesla** on the second stage. I own some of their material but I had never seen them live, so didn't really know what to expect. There were no surprises, the band did what they have done for years with no frills. It is always difficult to put over what you are all about in just thirty minutes, but they did okay in the time they had, and the weather held out.

I was surprised to find that **Black Label Society**, or to be exact Zakk Wylde, had only been here once before, a bit of a mystery for a Heavy Rock festival like this. Last time they played here (2012), Wylde came on stage with a Native American Indian head-dress, but that didn't appear today. Wylde has a quite distinctive voice, alongside the guitar squeal, so you are not going to mistake them for anyone else. And we were not going to miss hearing them with a wall of ten Marshall stacks behind, plus even more speakers under the drums. 'My Dying Time', 'Godspeed Hellbound', 'Suicide Messiah' and 'Concrete Jungle' were all included in the forty-five minute set. BLS are just inside my musical taste circle, some of it being a bit too Metal, but I just liked hearing the guitar, and everybody here today seemed to appreciate it.

Within Temptation was a definite "must see" on the main stage, even though I had seen them recently in April on their 'Hydra' tour. Well, I saw most of them as anyone who read my review of that show will know that I was a little disappointed in only seeing Sharon Den Adel for about a third of the show. Here I got to see her all the way through, so for me it was better. They performed quite a few of their 'Hydra' songs which went down very well, but the thing I noticed was the tracks with guest vocalists on video ('Paradise' and 'And We Run') had the problem of the screen being low on the stage and the sound wasn't loud enough; at least, not where we were at the front. Despite this, they received the reaction that you would expect from a band whose star continues to rise, and now that everyone is over the shock of a rapper on the latter of these two, it fits neatly with all the other material.

Avenged Sevenfold had a bit of a mishap when they appeared on the main stage in 2011 (was it really that long ago?) when some of the pyrotechnics didn't work as they were supposed to. It didn't do them any harm of course as they went on to have a number one album both here and in America at the same time; not surprising then that they are now headlining on the main stage. Having said that, it wasn't the biggest crowd I had seen here for a headliner when, after an AC/DC 'Back In Black' intro, Synyster Gates appeared on the runway to start with 'Shepherd Of Fire'. The stage set was as expected from Ax7, with the "king" eventually appearing through the middle window and again, there was a lot of fire and explosions as they went through songs including 'Critical Acclaim', 'Hail To The King', 'Buried Alive', 'Nightmare', 'This Means War' and 'Beast And The Harlot'. There was also a guitar solo thrown in there which incorporated the national anthem. The rain decided to make an appearance, which saw a lot of people leaving the main arena, which was a shame as it didn't last for too long. There were two encores, with two of my favourite songs in the first, 'Seize The Day' and 'Almost Easy', with 'A Little Piece Of Heaven' and 'Unholy Confessions' bringing the first day to a close.

Saturday 14th

Today was a little sparse with bands of interest, so decided I would probably check out artists I would never normally see. At this point I had no idea who they would be, but as it turned out I didn't have to wait long to find out.

Iceman Thesis was a bit of a mystery as they were listed on both the Red Bull and third stages at the same time! I was told to get to the third stage as something special was going to happen. What happened was a bit weird. There was a very long intro of strange synthesizer music, and then the band came on one at a time, each one with their heads covered. The crew at the side of the stage also had their faces covered. Oh yes, and there was a mannequin stood in front of the drums with a sack over its head. They did one "song", of which I couldn't understand any of the words, and then they walked off. And the mannequin was thrown to the crowd. Very strange.

I decided to stay on the third stage and see **Collibus** because I realised that over the years I have become quite a fan of Female-Fronted Rock bands. However, the problem I had here was that they were the kind of band that did music that should be done by others. I have said this many times, female vocals cannot do Led Zeppelin properly.

I was advised to see **Lawnmower Deth** by a mate of mine who said that you could never be sure what surprises they would come up with while on stage. So I went along. It wasn't really for me and I couldn't understand a word vocalist Pete Lee "sang". Oh, and there were no surprises.

Download never feels the same if my old mates **Bowling For Soup** aren't here. Once again they were performing twice, once on the main stage and also on the Jagermeister stage later on. I couldn't be definite on this, but I estimated there were as many in the arena for them as there were for Ax7 last night. As usual, Jaret Reddick and the guys just threw a party on stage that everyone understood and enjoyed. Even I was surprised at just how many people around me were singing along, some that you just wouldn't expect. There were lots of old favourites in there; 'Almost', 'The Bitch Song', 'My Weiner', '1985' and of course 'Girl All The Bad Guys Want'. Also, the last remaining inflatable sheep (those that have been here before may remember that its mate was dispatched in a rather unusual manner last time) was sacrificed by a man in armour with a big pointy sword; this is normal for BFS at Download. They also did an acoustic set later on the Jagermeister stage, mainly Reddick and Eric Chandler, but they were eventually joined by the rest of the guys, plus the crew, stewards and

anybody else they could get on stage.

Twisted Sister kind of depressed me a little. They were brilliant on the second stage and that was the thing. Dee Snider is fifty-nine years old! Yet he was running around like a child on additives, and I just wondered where it all went wrong for me! A lot of people had turned up to see them and proclaimed them the band to see before and after the set. Old favourites 'We're Not Gonna Take It', 'I Am (I'm Me)' and 'I Wanna Rock' were all in there, along with a cover of Motorhead's 'Born To Raise Hell' which was a bit of a surprise. The blonde (white?) hair was rampant and tonight proved you're never too old to Rock.

Sunday 15th

The final day was going to be the busiest day of the three, with some decent music on the menu. I had heard some of **Skillet's** material before, not least the latest album 'Rise', which I thought was very good. This was the first time I had seen them live, and they were equally as impressive here as they were on album. As Download "virgins" they were not daunted by the task in hand and gave a crisp, professional and energetic performance on stage two. They are much bigger in the U.S.A. than here, but I feel that will change quite rapidly. As with most bands over the weekend, Skillet had enough time to do just five songs, 'Hero', 'Awake And Alive', 'Monster', 'Rebirthing' and the only track from 'Rise', 'Sick Of It,' which was a bit of a surprise to me. One thing I do have to mention is Jen Ledger's drumming, which was quite something to see. I don't think I have ever seen anyone attack a drum kit like she did, and she sang while she did it too. Definitely a band to watch.

This was one of the first chances to see **Richie Sambora** after his departure from Bon Jovi, and for whatever reasons and for however long, he will always draw a crowd. And the fact that he is now accompanied by the lovely **Orianthi** only adds to the attraction. I think everyone expected him to load his set with a lot of Bon Jovi stuff, but to be fair he only did a couple. Mind you, he only had time for six songs, but people seemed more appreciative of 'Lay Your Hands On Me' and 'Wanted Dead Or Alive,' particularly by the ladies. Honours were shared throughout with lead breaks between Sambora and Orianthi, which was nice to see. Maybe Sambora won't return to Jovi (most think he will), but if not I am sure on today's performance he will survive for a while yet.

This was the first time I had ever seen **Joe Bonamassa** play live because, as you may know, I am not a big Blues fan. Having said that I found I quite enjoyed what he put out. Snappily dressed in his light check suit, he squeezed some really nice sounds out of his gorgeous looking Les Paul in the five songs that he did, namely 'Oh Beautiful', 'Story Of A Quarryman', 'Slow Train', 'The Ballad Of John Henry' and a Black Country Communion number 'Song Of Yesterday.' It would be fair to say that Bonamassa is not a visual spectacle by any means and there is no production as such; he just gets on and plays, and he certainly can play.

Bearing in mind the mix of genres contained in **Volbeat's** music, the rise of this band has been quite remarkable. I wanted to catch them last year, but was unable to get down to stage two when they were on, so I was determined to see them this year. The stage set had a strong Western theme to reflect their latest album, and they had been joined by Rob Caggiano, after his departure from Anthrax last year, which has strengthened things a bit. Front-man Michael Poulson has a distinctive voice which all adds to an unmistakable sound. With an hour on stage and a quite sizeable back catalogue, this gave them plenty of opportunity to prove what they could do and they started off with 'Doc Holiday' then went through the full

range of their material playing at least one song from each of their albums; the highest number however coming from 'Outlaw Gentlemen' which is no surprise. I was a little surprised however, that they didn't play 'A Garden's Tale', the track that alerted me to them in the first place.

I must admit to being a little surprised that **Steel Panther** were third headliners on the main stage on Sunday, but then I thought "they are entertaining", and surely, that's what it's all about isn't it? Plus their music isn't bad actually, even if their lyrics are, shall we say, a little on the dodgy side. I probably wouldn't think that if they were totally serious about what they do, but then again, they are aren't they? The standards were rolled out today, 'Pussy Whipped', 'Asian Hooker', 'Glory Hole', 'Gold Digging Whore' and '17 Girls In A Row' which saw front-man Ralph Saenz/Michael Starr invite seventeen girls from the crowd to parade up and down on the walkway and then get them all to take their tops off. The obvious favourite though was 'Community Property' which had everyone singing along.

Although I am not totally familiar with much of their work, but what I have heard of **Alter Bridge** has been very promising. I am also totally familiar with vocalist Myles Kennedy's voice having seen him with Slash numerous times over the years. I tended to get the impression that people were more looking forward to Aerosmith than listening to Alter Bridge, which was a bit unfortunate for them. Probably not the best place to be but being the second headliners on the main stage also gave them one hour fifteen minutes to ply their trade, during which they gave us twelve songs including 'Addicted To Pain', 'Come To Life', 'Ghost Of Days Gone By' and 'Ties That Bind'. We also had a Kennedy acoustic solo during 'Watch Over You,' and part of the Beatle's 'Blackbird.'

I saw the **The Pretty Reckless** the last time they played at Download and to be fair, people were more interested in what Taylor Momson was wearing than what she was singing. They had climbed a few places up the bill this year, which wasn't surprising having heard the latest album, which isn't at all bad. They played the song I was waiting for 'Heaven Knows' from the new album which to me is a cross between Queen and Led Zeppelin believe it or not. There is probably a draw because of who she is, and she will have her detractors for the same reason, but on today's performance, in front of a sizeable audience on the second stage, there should be a lengthy future for the band.

Believe it or not this would be the first time that I had seen **Aerosmith** live. I was here four years ago when the torrential rain hit the festival, but like a lot of others, we got so fed up with the rain that we left before Aerosmith came on. Terrible I know, but there's only so much you can take. So I was quite looking forward to this, and when they came on the thought that was in my mind the most was "is it going to rain or not?" And this was the first time for many years that I have actually gone to the front of the crowd, (well almost), to see a band at a festival. And I have to say I thoroughly enjoyed it, although it is never easy, being lost among that many people when you are my age. We all know Joe Perry and Steven Tyler are the main draw here, but I have to say that Tyler didn't stop for a minute. He moved across, up, down, along, everywhere on the stage all through the concert, and once again this is quite annoying for somebody like me. How dare he be that fit at that age? Although I don't own that much of their material on CD, I was surprised to find just how many of their songs I knew by the end of the night; 'Love In An Elevator', 'Cryin'', 'Living On The Edge', 'Toys In The Attic', 'I Don't Want To Miss A Thing', 'Dude Looks Like A Lady' and 'Walk This Way'. I have to admit to smiling at the end of '... Thing,' when Tyler said that that was his favourite Aerosmith song, my immediate thought being "but it was written by Diane Warren". They also did a copy of the Beatle's 'Come Together' which went down very well. We also had a vocal spot from Perry, who sang 'Freedom Fighter' while Tyler went off to do whatever he needed to do. Also, making the most of the large screens, both Perry and Tyler were followed by cameras everywhere they went. Unusually for me, I actually stayed right until the end of the show, simply to see what kind of finish they would have. I wanted to see how big the fireworks were going to be. Typically, they didn't have any.

So that was it for yet another year. For most of the weekend the weather held off but the few times it did rain I got soaked. What can you do? I had very little beer, and I still haven't worked out why that was. I met some old friends both on and off stage and saw some bands that were new to me in the live arena, and that I would go and see again, which has got to be a good thing. Normally at this point I would speculate on who the headliners for next year would be, but as I never get it right I won't bother this time. I will just wait another ~~year~~, aagh no, ten months. See, it's happening again...

Andy Brailsford

FIRIN' ON ALL SIX!

LIT
Birmingham: Institute Library
17 May 2014

I arrived too late to watch the support band due to a long interview with Lit which is always disappointing and yet if interviewee Jeremy Popoff wasn't actually the guitarist of the main act, then I may well have missed them too.

Lit has never toured these shores properly, save for festival appearances or the odd one off warm up gig, circumstances simply haven't allowed it; the dreaded big C tragically claiming the life of drummer Allen Schellenberger and before that the obvious problems associated with losing a major label deal. Lit made their mark with the classic 'A Place In The Sun' album in 1999 and a fifteen year anniversary seems like the perfect excuse to do a tour.

This was as good a concert as I have seen and with six hundred people packed into the cosy Institute Library, the atmosphere was one of the most exciting that I have ever witnessed at any venue. The band played the whole of "that" album from 'Four' right the way through to the title track, with obvious highlights in between being 'Ziplock' and 'My Own Worst Enemy'; actually to be honest I really can't pick.

With the most senior mosh pit ever witnessed in the U.K., the band then proceeded to blast out a further nine songs with the verve and the energy usually the preserve of bands far younger. 'You Tonight', 'The Broken' and the teary eyed 'Happy In The Meantime' (dedicated to Schellenberger) came and went, beer got thrown around, people fell over and you know what? Nobody cared and nobody wanted to leave the best party in Birmingham that weekend.

Come back soon Lit, Birmingham needs another party.

Mike Newdeck

RED DRAGON CARTEL/SYRON VANES/
JUPITER FALLS
London: Islington 02 Academy
06 June 2014

I must admit I felt incredibly sorry for the young Leeds band Jupiter Falls having to come on stage to barely a hundred punters in the venue. With a capacity of eight hundred, it felt like your mates turning up on stage at a Pub Rock gig to find half the punters setting off for home after getting a call from their irate wife that their dinner was about to be fed to the dog.

With the same booking agent that Red Dragon Cartel employ, it was not entirely unexpected to see this new Classic Hard Rock band with a 21st Century attitude on the support slot, and with a debut album 'Revolution' produced by the renowned Roy Z about to hit the shops, the modern styling's of 'Awake' and 'Bitter' mixed with the classic old-school sound of charity single 'Someday' and 'Chasing The Dragon'. All were aired to a lukewarm reception that showed a lot of promise amongst the youthful energy and spunk on stage.

I remember the 'Bringer Of Evil' album that came out back in 1984 and even recall the adverts in Kerrang! at the time. They were touted as Sweden's answer to the NWOBHM bands that were pushing Punk music back into the underground scene and were as traditional to Heavy Metal as ale and chips were to a Yorkshire-man. Vocalist/guitarist Rimbert Vahlstroem and guitarist Anders Hahne, after more than thirty years ploughing the Syron Vanes cause, looked as comfortable onstage as your favourite sofa is to sit in with drummer Mats Bergentz and Anders Sellborn filling in for Jakob Lagergren on bass. Their six songs on offer tonight were all culled from their latest offering 'Evil Redux' and the fast ripping 'Hellion Child' had some in the audience head-banging away. The mid-paced sing-along chorus of 'King Of It All' and the fast-tempo riffing of 'Only Hell Remains' saw SV hitting their stride with Vahlstroem and Bergentz sporting 'Lucifer' and 'Skull' t-shirts which left no doubt as to how "Metal" this band were. The grinding sludge of 'Bringer Of Evil' was in contrast to the melodic chorus of 'God's Gift' but they bowed out with the crunchy riffs and high vocals of the slow-paced burner 'End Of The World'. For me, it was quite the nostalgia trip to see a band some thirty years after being wide-eyed and dreamily leafing through my copy of Kerrang! at school.

And so to the return of the prodigal son... or Jake E Lee as he is otherwise known as, and with a grin and his custom Charvel strapped and ready, it was like 1986 all over again as that familiar wail launched into 'The Ultimate Sin'. Harem Scarem drummer and sometime Helix guitarist Darren James Smith is no Ozzy Osbourne or Ray Gillen, but he utilises his love of The Clash and throws in The Sex Pistols, The Ramones and dare I say it, Jellyfish to give a balls-out raspy injection of earthy melodic growling Rock 'n' Roll singing that actually suits the new Lee/Ronnie Mancuso music. Smith was as exuberant as he was menacing on stage prowling the boards and gave a convincing performance. It was hard to take your eyes off of him sometimes as he proved the old adage that inside every drummer is a born front-man. Beggars & Thieves bassist Mancuso, almost a stickler at times for Carlos Santana, was a grinning cool cat to Smith's right and Canadian Jonas Fairley from Black Betty pounded the skins and looked every bit like he belongs in such exalted company.

'Deceived' had Smith mimicking the accentuated tones of Osbourne as Lee re-introduced the guitar pattern and chord progression of 'Bark At The Moon'. 'War Machine' showed how much Sabbath-influence Lee picked up from Osbourne and Smith was able to tailor his voice to the Blues-drenched Gillen songs with 'High Wire' and 'Rumblin' Train' from Badlands' debut, 'Shine On' and 'In A Dream' from 'Voodoo Highway' with 'Sun Red Sun' representing third album 'Dusk'. Mancuso was contented to play the straight man to Smith's grinning ball of energy whilst Lee was radiant as he pulled off runs and solos spinning and throwing shapes so reminiscent of the old Osbourne videos we used to watch on MTV. The Zeppelin inspired chant-fest 'Shout It Out' and 'Feeder' made up the quartet of songs from Red Dragon Cartel's debut album and no surprise to hear '...Moon' – Lee's signature tune to most fans – rounding off the night's entertainment. The fans, who managed to fill two thirds of the venue in the end, were just happy to see Lee back doing what he was renowned for all those years ago even if the audience seemed a little hesitant to get fully involved.

Carl Buxton

DAN REED NETWORK
London: 02 Academy Islington
10 June 2014

This evening represented a very special treat for fans of the short-lived Dan Reed Network as it epitomised their first live performance in London for over two decades (although they made their return in U.K. soil last year at the Enchanted Festival). The quintet, who released their eponymous debut album back in 1987 and went on hiatus only six years later, has returned stronger than ever. With the multi-cultural, original line-up of guitarist Brion James, bassist Melvin Brannon, keyboardist Blake Sakamoto, drummer Dan Pred and vocalist Dan Reed, DRN have a spectacular onstage presence!

I had seen Reed performing solo on several occasions, presenting acoustic versions of DRN and his solo material, and every time he left a long lasting impression on me with his heartfelt and moving rhythms. However, now seen DRN for the first time live, they are a completely different beast. The mellow and calm Reed became a performing tiger on stage, with his band mates following his lead and throwing an eye catching array of body moves. As for the music, their full of energy and Groove Funk songs made these guys such a tight and professional outfit that it is hard to beat; all in all making this evening was, so far, one of the best gigs yours truly has attended in 2014.

Classics such as 'Under My Skin', 'Rainbow Child', 'Make It Easy' and 'Ritual' (performed twice due to a mistake by James, making of it a friendly joke) gained a massive response from their loyal fans. The icing on the cake was a series of impromptu verses from several different songs that the audience was requesting, and Reed also mentioned on stage that they will hopefully release a new album soon. Amen to that.

The mega Funky 'Tiger In A Dress' became the first encore before they closed the night with a beautiful A Cappella rendition of 'Long Way To Go' for which all band members came to the front of the stage. After singing along to this, everyone left happily with worn out voices.

Mónica Castedo-López

RICHIE SAMBORA
London: Islington O2
13 June 2014

Despite being a Richie Sambora fanatic for twenty years, I've only seen "The King Of Swing" headline once, in 2012. So it's safe to say I was as excited and expectant as I've ever been considering, for this my second show, I was actually stood in the photo pit.

The lights eventually dropped and out he came, all on his own, resplendent in a dark outfit and white jacket combined with a trademark hat. He proceeded to serenade the crowd with Leon Russell's 'A Song For You' without any instruments, his face contorted to the song's emotion and his hands gesturing as he stood alone in the spotlight. He was then joined by the rest of the band, which included "The Queen Of Shred" Orianthi (Michael Jackson, Alice Cooper). 'Every Road Leads Home To You' and 'Nowadays' flew past in a orgy of photographs before we were allowed to enjoy the rest of the set (which consisted of Sambora solo tracks, Bon Jovi songs and covers from other artists) from the side of the stage.

Highlights included the boisterous crowd and solo during 'Lay Your Hands On Me', the mesmerizing guitar exchanges during Voodoo Chile (Jimi Hendrix), the bouncing 'Who Says You Can't Go Home' and the Orianthi/Sambora 'Storybook Love' (Willy DeVille/Mark Knopfler) duet. Between songs, there was lots of banter and background information from Sambora who kept the crowd enthralled throughout. The main set closed with a cracking version of 'I'll Be There For You' where the gathered masses sang the chorus over and over again; during an extended break, all the hands were up, the "whoooos" were ringing out loud and it was quite something.

But even these instances were surpassed by others that simply sent my senses and emotions swirling. There was only one song, 'Stranger In This Town', from my all-time favourite album but it sounded fabulous, especially when the crowd gave it their all in the choruses. Sambora also gave an acoustic based, slower rendition (on his famous twin-necked guitar) of 'Living On A Prayer', which featured both he and Orianthi on vocals with plenty of crowd participation. 'Seven Years Gone' has become my second favourite Sambora track and following an emotional introduction about his dad, he gave it everything for this one; even now, I literally get goose bumps thinking about my night's highlight. Of course no Sambora show would be complete without the fabulous 'Wanted Dead Or Alive'; the audience were at their loudest and they sang every word with real gusto and it brought things to a rapturous conclusion.

Sambora was on top form tonight and had he played more from his debut, including 'One Light Burning', I would be proclaiming this my greatest gig ever. Despite this negative, tonight was still sensational all round and one of my most memorable ever. Whilst I admit I am biased, the crowd response tonight says more than I ever could. Friday 13th may be unlucky for some, but if I have many other days this good, I will consider myself more than lucky.

Dave Scott

HEAVEN & EARTH
Newcastle: O2 Academy
28 June 2014

Guitarist Stuart Smith must possess an address book to envy, with the ability to call on the likes of Glenn Hughes, Howard Leese, Richie Sambora, Joe Lynn Turner and David Paich to work on his albums. This has resulted in music of a high quality but a little fragmented when listened to as a full album. Their latest record 'Dig', however, marks a change in approach with the inspired recruitment of Joe Retta as sole vocalist and this certainly paid dividends resulting in a more focussed, cohesive release drawing on the rich heritage of the likes of Deep Purple, Bad Company and prime time Rainbow.

With a touring line-up completed by Bad Company bassist Lynn Sorensen, drummer Jackie Barnes (son and absolute spitting image of Aussie screamer Jimmy) and Hammond organist Ty Bailie whose credentials spread from Counting Crows to Peter Frampton and Tool, this was a band of the highest pedigree.

Their towering epic 'Victorious', with Retta's Dio-esque vocals and Smith's eastern tinged fret-work with a worthy nod towards Led Zeppelin's 'Kashmir' and Rainbow's 'Stargazer', was the perfect way to open the show.

With a set list drawn primarily from 'Dig', Heaven & Earth were pure class from start to finish. The set was rich and varied with 'No Money, No Love', with its big chorus and powerful, driving groove, alongside the sky scraping melody of 'Waiting For The End Of The World' being two of the standout cuts from the album that were even better live. Perhaps the highlight however was the smouldering 'House Of Blues'; talk about stunning. Retta's vocals were pure gold, passionate and imposing, evoking memories of Paul Rodgers at his very best. If that wasn't enough, Smith's soaring solo was the icing on an already very delicious cake; a modern classic in the making.

Heaven & Earth dipped back into their first album, now nearing its 15th birthday for 'Heaven & Earth' (the song) and 'See That My Grave Is Kept Clean' with Retta's talent matching Turner and Hughes, who sang the originals, note for note. Their take on Deep Purple's 'When A Blind Man Cries' paid respect to the original while making it very much their own with Smith, a long-time friend of Ritchie Blackmore, tapping into the spirit of his mentor with style.

Being bankrolled by self-made millionaire Bruce Quarto (who was so impressed by the band he formed his own record label around them) along with a high profile support slot with the likes of Purple or Whitesnake may just be what it takes to catapult them up to the top table.

Mick Burgess

DEVIN TOWNSEND PROJECT
Nottingham: Rock City
03 July 2014

As I have said before, Devin Townsend is one of the few musicians that I really look forward to experiencing, either on disc or on stage, depending on which Townsend he is of course. Tonight he appeared to be the heavy strapping 'Ziltoid' guy, the one that I find a little more difficult to handle, although he didn't play much from any of those kind of albums. I am sure he won't mind me saying that, as he appreciates, there are two very different sides to him, if you don't like one, then fair enough, don't listen.

Of course, you have to listen if you are there to review things, but sometimes it was quite difficult tonight. The music was, and I didn't think I would ever hear myself saying this, very loud, making it sound like it was from his Strapping Young Lad days, or the 'Ziltoid' album (one song was), which caused Townsend's voice to get lost quite frequently in the music. As is quite common at Townsend's shows, there were the humorous projections at the back of the stage, a favourite of many being the exercising poodles.

Proceedings kicked off with 'Seventh Wave,' or they would have done if Townsend had been able to get a sound out of his guitar, but it was the first night and it wasn't long before things were sorted. Townsend stated that it was very strange for him as, being the first show, his life at that point was very different from what it was twelve years ago. He seemed quite overwhelmed by the reception he got as he continued with 'War,' coming off-stage into the pit to get closer to the crowd, before doing the one 'Ziltoid' track 'By Your Command.' To be fair, the tracks he did were all the heavier ones off the relevant albums, and I'm a much bigger fan of his more Progressive stuff; that said, even the tracks from 'Epicloud', namely 'Liberation' and 'Grace,' were belted out to the extent that I almost didn't recognise them. He was about to play the Sonisphere Festival at the weekend, so probably he ramped it up in preparation for that.

Townsend is a brilliant communicator, and everyone here tonight loved him and he deserved it. He is a brilliant musician and inspired composer; unfortunately, I was a bit too old for the amount of volume tonight.

Andy Brailsford

EXTREME
Manchester: Academy
04 July 2014

Back in 1990, there weren't many Hard Rock albums that created more of a stir than Extreme's 'Pornograffiti', and even less that musically covered so many bases. It only seems like yesterday that Sue and I celebrated our engagement by going to see the band at Manchester's International II and marvelled at the sheer adventurousness of the material, the multi-part harmonies and Nuno Bettencourt's dazzling guitar prowess. The band would come back to Manchester two further times, including this venue on the reunion tour, so it was a little surprising to hear singer Gary Cherone say that Manchester had outsold all other venues on this 25th Anniversary 'Pornograffiti' European tour.

It's actually a long, long time since I last heard a Manchester roar like the one that greeted their intro tape, it's just a shame that the mix was so bad when Extreme launched into the punchy 'Decadence Dance'. Heavily favouring Pat Badger's bass and Kevin Figeuiredo's bass drum, Bettencourt's guitar was weak and tinny and Cherone continued to be almost inaudible for the whole of 'L'il Jack Horny' and 'When I'm President' as Bettencourt eventually made himself heard and his phenomenal talent for tasty riffs and solos became apparent. Because of the nature of the record business at the time, playing an album in order means that most of the big songs will be in the first half and Extreme's 'Get The Funk Out' and the number one ballad 'More Than Words' have the band hardly audible for the crowd, a singalong which Cherone seems content just to conduct. By this time the sound has improved considerably and the album continues with the likes of 'Money (In God We Trust)', 'It('s A Monster)' and the title track.

Barring the superb 'Suzi (Wants Her All Day What?)' and a crushingly heavy 'He-Man Woman Hater' the end of the set features the more laid back tunes, only the glorious 'Hole Hearted' matching the audience response of the first few numbers. Many who obviously only know the band for the one album or the singles don't bother to stay for the half-hour encore, which is a bit of a relief and leaves a bit more space in the jam-packed, swelteringly hot venue. A frenetic and fun 'Play With Me' from the debut gives way to a trio of tunes from the much maligned 'III Sides To Every Story', of which 'Am I Ever Gonna Change?' is the pick, but the band have been so well recieved that even slipping in 'Midnight Express' from 'Waiting For The Punchline' fails to kill the atmosphere. Tonight was a phenomenal event despite an average performance from Cherone and some dodgy sound issues (which apparently ruined some of the other shows!), but hopefully Extreme will be back again soon with a new album to support.

Phil Ashcroft

SOUTHSIDE JOHNNY & THE ASBURY JUKES
London: O2 Shepherd's Bush Empire
11 July 2014

When the opening act and guest star is Gary U.S. Bonds, you know the night is going to be special - and it was! Southside Johnny, a legend of the Jersey Shore and his band the Asbury Jukes (the greatest bar band in the world) are regular visitors to the U.K. Tonight they put on what, as their tour manager Joe Prinzo said, was their best U.K. show ever.

Bonds started proceedings and belied his years by putting on a great performance and showed off his voice which is still very much there. His big hits (the 1960s 'New Orleans' and the Bruce Springsteen penned early 1980s hit 'This Little Girl') were included in the short set as well as a great version of the Blues classic 'Murder In The First Degree'. Then, on came SJ and the pair performed a fantastic version of the Righteous Brothers' 'You've Lost That Loving Feeling'; all this before the main act started!

After a short interval, SJATAD started off in force with 'Save Me' from Little Steven's 'Men Without Women' album; the classic piano intro and the horn section got the crowd into the swing from the get go. Regarding the band, they were fantastic musicians and singers in their own right; honestly, check them and their back catalogue out on their website as, sadly, there is no space here.

Anyone who has seen SJ live will know his gigs are a celebration of the Jersey sound which is a mixture of all things good from 1950s and 1960s Rock 'n' Roll and a Stax/Motown groove. As a result of this and SJ's frenetic personality, all his songs are full on; SJ and the band just keep playing and didn't wait for the faint hearted!

In this whirlwind of a show, pretty much all the main songs were there including the Springsteen penned 'The Fever' and 'Hearts Of Stone' which both went down a storm. Highlights, and there were many, included 'This Time It's For Real' and SJ's signature song 'I Don't Want To Go Home' (which was apt as a closing track because it was played close to the curfew time).

With two singing legends, a hot band, great songs and an enthusiastic audience, live shows don't get much better than this. On the other hand this was just another enjoyable night for SJ; as he said to me after the show "I don't remember anything"!

Rob McKenzie

NIGHT BY NIGHT
London: The Borderline
24 July 2014

It's been a long time coming for this band, but finally Night By Night have managed to get their album released and I was fortunate enough to be amongst those who crammed into The Borderline in London for the launch party. With the support bands all looking like rejects from Black Veil Brides, this was obviously the place where the "hip kids" were hanging out. I must admit, I did rather enjoy States Of Panic though, so I'm not quite past it yet!

Having been around for a couple of years now and having several singers in the frame since original vocalist Dan Rossall left, the band settled on Henry Rundell, the ex-Voodoo Six front-man who had a penchant for face paint. Taking the decision to re-record the album with Rundell was by no means an easy one, but tonight any nay-sayers would have their fears totally allayed by his performance. He may not be as charismatic as Rossall, but his vocal prowess was completely faultless and the band seems to have gelled around him to make this one of the tightest units I've seen in a long time.

Since there are no weak tracks on this, my most played album of 2013, I find it hard to choose a favourite from the live set, but obvious stand outs are 'Time To Escape' and 'The Moment' and all without a backing tape in sight, which made a welcome change from so many of today's rising stars. If you can't do it live, then don't do it – but these guys most definitely can…..and DO, with aplomb.

The encore was a real surprise. I don't think I've seen a band do such a good cover of Aerosmith's 'Love In An Elevator'. An inspired choice and, once again shows off the amazing harmonies this band can achieve.

The time has come for Night By Night and I see big things coming for them in the future if they can keep up the momentum from this gig.

Sue Ashcroft

THE STEVEN SEAGAL BLUES BAND
Southampton: The Brook
24 July 2014

Yes, for the benefit of those who've just done a double take, the header does indeed say Steven Seagal. He's obviously best known as an actor having starred in multiple action films since 1988. But what's far less known is that Seagal is an accomplished Blues guitarist who started playing at the age of ten and he has so far released two albums in the mid-noughties. I have always been a fan of his movies and first came across his musical endeavours about eight years ago; I was instantly drawn to his classy style of Blues and have been an enthusiast ever since. Despite being familiar with some songs, I had no idea what to expect from a live performance so went along with as much curiosity as expectation. I also must mention that this was an evening out so I wasn't taking notes (of song titles, amount of songs, things said etc) and only decided to review post gig.

To my surprise, with twenty minutes to go till the venue opened, the line of people stretched right down the road; I have seen far less for far more established acts so this was a good sign for a potentially good evening. The proceedings kicked off with young guitarist Krissy Matthews who performed a solo acoustic set with added stomp box. He played for about thirty minutes and his first few tracks were quite lively and featured a Country like vibe. Matthews showed great ability on his guitar and delivered it all with a relaxed and affable manner despite him confessing that it was seriously hot up on stage. His latter few songs leaned more towards a Blues style, in keeping with the headline act, and were equally well performed.

After the shortest break I can remember, the main man's band stepped out on stage. They quickly started jamming and soon after, Seagal appeared from the back to quite a cheer. It was clear early on that his abilities on guitar were quite impressive; he holds it unusually high and visually reminded me a little of watching present day Bernie Marsden. At times he was thumbing the strings, others soloing quite normally and even picking notes along the neck on occasions. He was superbly supported by his backing band who played a blinder with lots of rhythm, keys and guitar work of their own all combining to make an intoxicating

Blues mix. I must give a special mention to his female backing singer who was a bundle of energy and soaring notes from start to finish. Half way through the show a friend turned to me and commented it was "like being in bar in The French Quarter in New Orleans" and he should know, having been there several times. It was a thought that stuck with me and personally, it is how I would imagine such an evening to be and as each song came and went I enjoyed the evening more and more. The lighting, as always at The Brook, was simple yet effective and the show was much the same. There was no visual dynamics or showboating; the musicians simply got on with pouring their heart and soul into the music and Seagal himself was top drawer whether it was playing or singing in that deep smoky voice. The majority of the material came from his second album 'Mojo Priest', including 'Alligator Ass' and 'Love Doctor'. Seagal only left the stage once during the ninety minute set and it seemed to come and go in a flash which is another indicator of how good a show it was. What topped the evening off was Seagal came out and met the fans and signed autographs for almost an hour afterwards.

I had reasonably high expectations tonight having heard Seagal on record and this evening met them and then some. I was genuinely quite blown away by The Steven Seagal Blues Band and can thoroughly recommend them. This was a superb night of well performed Blues with Steven Seagal being somewhat of a revelation live; certainly a case of "he also acts"…

Dave Scott

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HOUSTON

A Melodic Rock take on Rick Springfield is okay, but what about Lady Gaga…? With their new album, 'Relaunch II', Houston prove music has no borders – and this recent release was the reason Alexandra Mrozowska caught up with band members Ricky Delin (keyboards) and Hank Erix (vocals) to find out more.

I believe your new release 'Relaunch II' is a kind of sequel to 2011's 'Relaunch'. What's the idea behind this cover-studded formula you embarked on?

RD: Quite simple really. Our first album was very well-received back in 2010 and pretty much anyone would say that the Houston sound would bring the listener back to bands like Journey, Survivor, Foreigner, etc – the classic spacious AOR sounds of the past. Our label at the time, with A&R man Dante Bonutto, really thought we should cement our sound and dedication to that era by recording some classic, much loved, yet obscure covers of their and our choice. It was meant to be an EP, but we also recorded some acoustic versions of our previously released originals, so it became a full length album. I came up with the 'Relaunch' title with regards to both Houston and covers. I'm glad we did it. When Red Bull used our version of Dakota's 'Runaway', it gave us that kind of huge recognition one usually can only dream about.

HE: Yeah, thanks to Red Bull and Dany MacAskill we got a lot of attention – too bad we're named Houston (laughs), otherwise I think more people would find us on social medias and experience the rest of our music (laughs). Hopefully, we'll grow and we'll get easier to find. We've got a lot to thank the first 'Relaunch' album for and if it hadn't been so popular we wouldn't have gone through with the production of 'Relaunch II'. They're both great in-between albums that allow us to experiment a lot more and you got to be allowed to do that as an artist.

The artists you've chosen to cover range from John Farnham to Lady Gaga and One Republic. What's the reason for such diversity?

RD: A great song is a great song and if you look at many chart artists today they can have hit upon hit and the singles will be amazingly different in genres. We've decided now that we'll be writing originals like that as well. We hope to entertain our fans, old and new, with great songs, whether you'd label it AOR, Melodic Rock or plain Pop music. We hear some really nice Melodic Rock in songs of bands like One Republic and Imagine Dragons. The package may be different, but melody is still king.

HE: Indeed. We love Journey, Survivor and Foreigner to death, but in some way I think One Republic is even more "Journey" than Journey itself today. The music industry changes all the time and now more than ever; if you look at the biggest artists of today, most of them aren't bound to a particular genre. I think that kind of reflects today's society, there should be no sexes, no sexual orientations and no ethnicity; we shouldn't put labels on people. Similarly, we feel we don't want to label our music.

There are four brand new songs on 'Relaunch II'. What are your personal highlights?

RD: Some nice feel-good tracks in a Houston style. The standout song for me is 'Standing On The Moon'. That's our first song that marks the start of the new era where we make beautiful music, not clinging to our "typical" sound or what's "expected" in terms of instrumentation and production. Simply one of the most beautiful songs I've been blessed to be a part of.

HE: I totally agree with Ricky, 'Standing On The Moon' is the first step of our new musical journey. Everyone in the band loved it and I was quite surprised at how the guys can't wait to play it live. Hope you guys like it as much as we do! It's true emotions, true music, from every note in the chords to every letter in the lyrics.

'Our Love', features guests from Reckless Love, Crazy Lixx, Casablanca and Reach. How did you guys hook up?

HE: This song has been in the pipeline for quite some time. Before we recruited the new band we needed to make a song, since it was several months after the release of Houston's 'II' album. With just me and Ricky in the band, we had a great opportunity to invite some friends that we met during our tours. We played in Madrid 2011 and I met Pepe from Reckless Love, who thought I looked a bit like Jani Lane from Warrant - in his prime time, I hope! - I asked if that was a compliment... and obviously it was, 'cause he agreed to play the guitars. Me and Andy from Crazy Lixx go a few years back and we were doing some music together just before he joined Crazy Lixx – he agreed to do the solo, which is fantastic! Mats from Casablanca is a good friend of ours and he wrote the song together with Ricky. Marcus from Reach is one of my best friends and he was perfect for this song. You see all these Melodic Rock and AOR albums that have a lot of guests, but no bands were joining forces and helping each other. A lot of bands see each other as rivals and if they're bringing guests it has to be someone who's been in the game for many, many years. I wanted to bring some of the up and coming bands together and do something really special for our fans.

'Relaunch II' also features duets with a singer Victor Lundberg and singer/ producer Lizette Von Panajott. How do you think their contributions influenced the result of the recordings?

RD: Victor was doing some amazing back-up Vocals on 'II' on tracks such as 'Talk To Me' and 'On The Radio'. Since then he has joined the band as a keyboard player and will be part of Houston's future. He's a great singer and now also band member - that's why he gets a bigger feature on 'Relaunch II'. This is our fourth album and we've done a duet with a female on all four of them. First it was the lovely Ms. Helena Alsterhed on our popular track 'Truth Slips' and then we moved on with Amaranthe's own Elize Ryd and Swedish Idol runner up Minnah Karlsson. For 'Relaunch II' we obviously needed a woman to do Gaga's parts and my dear friend Lizette Von Panajott IS The Lady Gaga of Sweden – so that was a no-brainer. You can't find a cooler woman and she nailed it!

Can we expect a new Houston album that is comprised entirely of new material anytime soon?

HE: Of course! We are planning it right now and have already begun writing some songs. Both me and Ricky are also working on our solo albums that we've wanted to do for quite some time. We'll make it but for now we are focusing more on the live scene!

RD: Totally up to the label. We could have a new album of originals done in three to four months if given the green light.

What are the band's plans for the next months?

HE: We're looking for representation to be able to do more shows but at the moment we're planning a showcase in Greece this winter and some more dates in the UK for 2015! If there's ever been any doubt to Houston, which I can understand since we kind of disappeared for a while, let me tell you that we are back stronger and better sounding than ever. This album is the new start of Houston.

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